

Ready, Set, Grow!

The “hot heat” of summer is here and most folks are staying cool indoors. But this sort of weather is just what many plants are perfectly happy with. June is a good time to plant okra, mirliton, eggplant, and other heat-loving vegetables. We can also plant most summer herbs now, whose leaves are the main attraction, allowing more heat tolerance. June is the right time to plant pumpkins as well, assuming you want them ready for an October harvest.

June is often a peak month for production of many summer vegetables. Now that so much work has been done to grow our vegetables, let’s take the time to harvest the best we can. Fruit and vegetables are still alive when we eat them, so we want to keep them in the best of health from field to table.

Tomatoes can be picked as soon as they start to turn colors and will continue to ripen on the counter. Though peak flavor is achieved with full “vine ripening,” there are often concerns with stink bugs, disease, cracking (from inconsistent water levels), etc. when left outside.

Sweet peppers will color nearly as well indoors as tomatoes do, but there are usually fewer outdoor threats to quality by bugs and their ilk. For growing colorful peppers, we can let them at least mostly ripen on the plant. For green ones, we pick them when they’re firm and large enough (up to our judgment) or as soon as they begin to change colors. Any sweet pepper does ripen to a different color (other than green) eventually.

For any produce, we need to keep the plant well-watered. A *deep watering* two or three times a week is usually sufficient. When cucumbers turn bitter (especially the stem end) it’s because the plants have gotten too dry. If we water, then pick a day later, they won’t be bitter.

For the best quality of any vegetables, we should pick in the early morning, before heat begins to wilt them. Get them out of the heat as quickly as you can.

Once inside, harvested produce should be cleaned and dried. Any blemishes, bruises, or broken skin will lead to rot quickly. Most produce can be refrigerated to extend shelf life, but NOT tomatoes. Cold temperatures destroy tomato flavors and contradict the reason we grew them at home in the first place. (Of course, tasteless tomatoes are better than rotten tomatoes, so refrigerate if you must.)

Squash and okra can be hard to keep up with and eggplants aren't far behind. These plants need a daily check or the fruit will over-mature. Hard, seedy squash; tough, stringy okra; and bitter, seedy eggplant can be very unpleasant. These problems happen more quickly in hotter weather so pick fruit at a smaller size as summer goes on. A sharp pair of garden shears will cut young fruit off neatly, minimizing damage to both food and plant.

A morning walk through the garden, *every morning*, is a pleasant way to start the day. It's also a great time to pick produce and scout for problems before they get too big. And if there's a question of whether something's ready to pick or not, it's probably ready.

If you want to know more about gardening, landscaping, or anything else horticultural, contact the St. John / St. James Parishes County Agent André Brock at abrock@agcenter.lsu.edu. Also, the LSU Ag Center's website can be accessed at www.lsuagcenter.com with lots of user-friendly information, including this article.