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When's the right time to pick squash, cucumbers?

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



A basket of freshly picked summer squash from Two Belly Acres in Sebastopol
Photo by Beth Schlanker/The Press Democrat 2016

Question: Our first vegetable garden is growing fast and there are blossoms on the summer squash and cucumber plants. How do we know when the vegetables are ready for harvest?

Answer: Congratulations on growing your first vegetable garden! Cucumbers and squash are in the same family, Cucurbitaceae, often referred to as cucurbits or the gourd family. When these fruits are harvested, it signals to the plant to continue growing and fruiting. When fruit is left on the plant too long, cucumbers and squash will become less palatable and the plant won't channel energy into producing more fruit. Checking the plants every two days is advised once they start blossoming and growing fruit. However, sometimes fruit will escape our attention and get too big. With cucumbers, these overmature fruits can be added to smoothies, dips and flavored waters or used for saving seed. Overgrown squashes are wonderful in soups and sauces, stuffed and also as sources of seed.

To get a rough estimate when cucumbers and squash are close to harvest ready, look on your seed packets or plant tags to see how many days until maturity. This is the time from when you planted the seed to the time of harvest. If you planted starts, they might be ready sooner. With cucumbers, maturity is at about 55-65 days. Squash can be anywhere from 45-60 days depending on the variety. Seed packets and plant tags can also indicate the general size in inches for when to start harvesting.

Some varieties of pickling cucumbers have a broad range of when they can be picked. For example, the variety Homemade Pickles notes on its seed packet that it can be harvested when the fruit is 1 ½ inches to 6 inches long. The popular lemon cucumber is best picked when small and light green, with a shading of yellow. Once it turns as yellow as a lemon, it becomes bitter and seedy. The long Armenian cucumber can grow 12-15 inches in length while straight green slicing cucumbers like Marketmore are best at about 6-8 inches long. Burpless varieties (bred to have little or no cucurbitacin, which can cause bitterness and make people burp), are best at around 10 inches. Small crispy thin-skinned Persian cucumbers are ready to eat at 3-5 inches long.

Glossy skin on squash

To determine the readiness of summer squash, look for glossy skin and whether they are tender enough to be pierced with a thumbnail. Round zucchini squash can be harvested at 3-4 inches in diameter, while regular zucchini is very tender at 6-8 inches long. Crookneck squash (yellow or green) are best at 3-4 inches. Many people like the scalloped squash sometimes called Patty Pan. These varieties can be eaten at two inches to seven inches in diameter. With so few cays to maturity, summer squash is a crop that can be planted in midsummer for a fall harvest.

Many people enjoy the taste and texture of squash blossoms. Male squash blossoms emerge before the female blossoms (the flower with a swelling of fruit at its base). Harvesting only a few male squash blossoms and leaving a few on the plant is best, as pollinators transport pollen from the male blossoms to the female blossoms for the full formation of the fruit. Rinse the harvested blossoms and keep in ice water in your refrigerator for a day or two before frying or sautéing. If there aren't many fully formed squash, insect pollination may be lacking. You can transfer pollen — the bright yellow/orange grains in center of squash flower — by hand from male flowers to female flowers with a soft paintbrush.

To harvest vegetables, use clippers or a knife to cut the fruit away from the vine or bush. Pulling on the fruit can damage the plants. After harvesting summer squash and cucumbers, store them in your refrigerator to preserve freshness. Above all, enjoy your harvests and share the bounty with others.

Contributors to this week's column were Sue Lovelace, Diane Judd and Joy Lanzendorfer. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County sonomamgucanr.edu provides environmentally sustainable, science-based

horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.