

BEST PRACTICES FOR HARVESTING AND DONATING PRODUCE

Chester County is the wealthiest county in Pennsylvania and yet 1 in 4 households struggle to make ends meet. Most of us have participated in a food drive, donating canned items. Canned foods tend to be high in sodium, sugar, or preservatives and are not always the healthiest choice. Fresh green beans from the garden have more vitamins and nutrients than canned. Sharing the bounty of a garden helps our neighbors meet their dietary needs in a healthful way.

Food safety is an important part of growing, harvesting and storing garden produce. The Chester County Food Bank would like to share recommendations on:

- Food safety and harvesting practices
- Post harvesting handling - storing and transport
- Guidance on popular vegetables

Food Safety & Harvesting Practices

Personal hygiene

- Do not harvest while sick, or until 24 hours after symptoms have subsided (vomiting, diarrhea, fever)
- Ensure that all harvesters wash hands thoroughly in warm, soapy water for 20 seconds. All open cuts or wounds should be properly covered.
- Wear gloves.

Harvesting

- Use clean harvesting tools (knives, scissors)
- Morning is the best time to harvest, though plant foliage should be dry.
- Pick at peak maturity and ripeness. Size doesn't always determine this.
- Frequent harvesting stimulates fruit production ie. cucumber, beans, tomato, pepper, eggplant, squash.
- Avoid damaging the crop during harvesting. For some crops a sharp knife or scissors are best for making clean cuts.
- Do not leave the harvest in direct sun. This will cause it to wilt quickly.
- Remove any rotten, damaged leaves, or potentially contaminated produce with evidence of bird droppings, or animal/rodent bites.

Post-Harvest Handling - Storage & Transport

- Use only clean, food grade containers (bags or bins) for transport of produce – bins should be properly washed between each use.
- Be mindful of the containers you are donating in. Do not use garbage bags – especially not scented ones. Many containers are made from compounds that are not intended for food use.
- If donating in bags, clear bags are preferred.
- Do not put produce in a hot vehicle. This will cause it to wilt quickly.

Only donate quality produce you would enjoy eating yourself. Agencies reserve the right to decline your donation if it does not meet their standards of quality. For example: bolted, excessively muddy, or inedible.

POPULAR CROPS: & TIPS FOR HARVESTING & STORING

Common varieties of vegetables that are familiar are the most popular.

Check out our Vimeo channel for tutorial videos. <https://vimeo.com/channels/ccfbgardens>

- **Peas** – cut stem above the pod when fully developed, store in the refrigerator. <https://vimeo.com/417240336>
- **Spinach** – cut stems of larger leaves for loose leaf, multiple cuttings can take place before the plant bolts. Or cut at the base of plant for the full rosette, best prior to bolting. Store in the refrigerator. <https://vimeo.com/417248778>
- **Broccoli** - when heads are tightly formed approximately 4- 6 inches wide, use a knife to cut about 4 inches below the crown. Harvest before florets begin to separate and turn yellow. Store in the refrigerator. <https://vimeo.com/349738068>
- **Green Beans** - cut stem above the pod when 4-5 inches long, store in the refrigerator. <https://vimeo.com/356239279>
- **Cabbage** - harvest when heads are firm approximately 6-8 inches wide, cut head at the base of plant, remove loose leaves. Store in the refrigerator. <https://vimeo.com/356244445>
- **Carrot** – notice orange shoulders emerging from the soil, loosen soil with garden fork, wipe off any excess soil, store in the refrigerator. <https://vimeo.com/356246046>
- **Cucumber**- harvest daily at 5 to 7 inches long, use clippers to cut the stem, store in the refrigerator. <https://vimeo.com/356243295>
- **Lettuce** - different varieties can be planted in spring, summer and fall. Harvest head lettuce when the heads are 8-10 inches wide, cut at the soil level and remove any dead or brown leaves, refrigerate after harvesting. <https://vimeo.com/356256850>
- **Peppers** – days to maturity typically 65 days for green peppers, 85 days for red peppers. Harvest when they are firm, cut at the stem. Refrigerate after harvesting. <https://vimeo.com/356261116>
- **Potato**- days to maturity 90 days after planting. After foliage dies back, dig up, gently wipe off soil do not rub too hard as to break the skin, this will cause rot. Keep in shaded area until skin dries, store in cool area, should NOT be refrigerated. <https://vimeo.com/356261935>

Crops to consider NOT growing/donating:

- **Tomato** – many home gardeners grow way more tomato plants than they need. Food Cupboards receive many, many tomatoes every summer. Tips: store in open crate/ box container, NO MORE than 2 layers high, they should NOT be refrigerated. <https://vimeo.com/358077435>
- **Squash & Zucchini** – harvest daily at 6 to 8 inches long, cut stem from plant with harvest knife above the fruit, large over-sized squash should NOT be donated (over 10 inches), refrigerate after harvesting. <https://vimeo.com/356266096>