

After anxiously tending to our tomato plants for the past several months, we finally are beginning to harvest tomatoes on a regular basis. Nothing beats the flavor of a fresh, vine-ripened, garden-picked tomato. The question might be, “How does one know when it is the proper time to pick a tomato?”

According to the website called ‘Tomato Dirt’ there are four things to look for when determining the proper time to pick a tomato. I’ve paraphrased some of the information from this site.

(1) Uniform Color:

Did you know that tomatoes ripen from their blossom end to their shoulders? When a tomato is picked from the vine, its flavor development immediately stops. If picked too soon, the color of a tomato will continue to develop even as it sits on the kitchen counter; sadly, however, such color change does little to enhance the flavor. The best tasting tomato occurs when the fruit is uniform in color from top to bottom. Tomatoes ripen from the inside out. If a tomato looks ripe on the outside, it will be ripe on the inside. Although anxious to eat garden picked tomatoes, if they are not fully ripe, I suggest waiting until the tomato is uniformly red if it is a red tomato or uniformly yellow if it is a yellow tomato. It is then, the flavor is at its best. Interestingly, determinate tomatoes such as Roma tomatoes all ripen at nearly the same time. When growing determinate, be ready for a large harvest. Determinate tomatoes are often grown for canning, freezing or making tomato sauce or juice. Indeterminate tomatoes continue to develop and ripen until frost finally destroys them. I usually recommend growing both types in the garden.

There is always an exception to the rule. For example, cherry tomatoes crack if left on the vine too long. Pick them just before they appear uniformly red.



(2) Touch:

One can check for ripeness by feel. A ripe tomato should be firm, but with just a little give, especially on the bottom and shoulders.

(3) Vine readiness:

If a tomato resists being picked, that is usually an indicator it is too early to harvest. When grasped and with a slight twist, most ripe tomatoes will

snap off the vine easily. Stay vigilant. Once tomatoes start ripening, check plants daily and pick only those that are ready. It doesn't take long for tomatoes to over-ripen. Overripe tomatoes will easily fall or be knocked to the ground. Sadly, there they rot.

(4) Taste:

Ultimately, flavor and texture are the best indicators of ripeness. Taste test tomatoes. By sampling, if the quality is not there, one can assume it simply needs more time to mature and ripen on the vine.

Tomatoes are surprisingly delicate. I'm always amazed that once tomatoes start producing, they do so in such great numbers. When that happens, one is often left with the decision of how to store tomatoes and yet retain quality, taste, and freshness. Although refrigeration seems logical, refrigerating tomatoes damages the membranes inside the fruit walls, causing tomatoes to lose flavor and develop the mealy texture we often associate with those tomatoes we purchase at grocery stores in the middle of winter. The best place to store tomatoes is on the counter top at room temperature. There, they actually continue to develop. Maturation peaks a few days after picking.

When left with the predicament of having too many tomatoes, share them with family, friends and neighbors. They, too, will surely appreciate the taste of a freshly picked garden-tomato. Who knows? Such action might even make you a better neighbor—at least in their eyes.

The moral of this story is tomatoes are meant to be eaten. For the best flavor, they should be allowed to ripen fully on the vine, then picked, and immediately eaten.