

*How to Harvest Small Fruit
From the Edible Garden*

EDIBLE GARDEN

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How to Harvest Small Fruit From the Edible Garden



Small fruits such as strawberries, raspberries, currants, saskatoons, and haskap are one of the biggest delights of the growing season – it’s hard to beat fresh fruit from the edible garden! Here are some suggestions to properly time the harvest of these berries and get the most out of your crops.



Strawberries



If you've just planted strawberries in your edible garden, don't harvest them during the first year. This helps the plants to establish themselves and produce runners. In that first year, remove the blossoms from strawberry plants to force them to reproduce vegetatively.

In the second year, you can pick fruit! When you see blooms on your plants, you'll know that the fruit will be ready and ripe in approximately 4 to 6 weeks. Bear in mind that all of the berries on a plant do not ripen all at the same time – the ones at the centre of the cluster tend to be ready to pick first.

Make sure the fruit is completely red (not showing any cream or green parts) before picking. If the berries become too ripe, they will start to darken in colour and become soft.

Don't grab the strawberry by the fruit when picking. You want to pinch the stem directly above the berry between your fingers and cleanly snip it off. Do not break the stems higher than 6 millimetres (1/4 inch) away from the berry. Take your time when picking so that the plants are not harmed.

Keep up with harvesting to prevent birds and wildlife from eating the fruit. This may mean you have to go out and pick every couple of days.

Strawberries should be put into a cool location or the refrigerator as soon as they've been harvested, and consumed within two or three days. If you intend to freeze them, process them as soon as they've been picked for best quality.



Raspberries



When you think of raspberries, you usually think of bright red ones, but there are also black, yellow, and even purple types.

It is time to pick raspberries when they are at full colour, with no green or cream colour present. To harvest raspberries, gently hold the berry (actually botanically not a berry at all but an aggregate fruit) between your thumb and forefinger and slowly remove it from the stem. There will be a little core (called a receptacle) left on the plant. If the raspberry doesn't easily part with the core, it's not ripe enough yet.

Raspberries are not ready all at once on individual plants, and the harvest period can last a few weeks. Try to pick every couple of days to keep up and reduce waste. Raspberries are too ripe when the fruit begins to darken, turn grey, or become mushy.



Currants



On the prairies, currants are usually harvested at the end of July or early August. Black currants take a bit longer to ripen than red currants, sometimes up to three weeks later.

Currants are borne on the branches in trusses called strings. When the whole string is fully coloured (red, yellow, or black, depending on the type of currant you are harvesting), and the fruits are no longer hard, it is time to pick them. You can pinch off the entire cluster with your fingers or use a small pair of scissors to do the job.

For most currant cultivars, not all the fruit on a currant shrub will ripen at once. (There are some exceptions). Currants have a long harvesting period – you can generally pick fruit for just over a month. If you plan to make jam or jelly out of currants, harvest the berries when they are slightly underripe, as they have a higher pectin content at this point. Bear in mind that they are also less sweet!

Currants should be eaten within one week. They freeze very well, however, so it is worth stocking up.



Haskap

Haskap (also known as edible blue honeysuckle) are usually harvested in late June through late July, depending on the cultivar. It is tricky to know exactly when haskap berries are ripe – the easiest way to tell is to do a taste test. They will colour fully into a dark blue-purple on the outside and you will think they are ready, but then when you bite into them, the fruit is still too hard, the centres are still bright red, and the taste is very sour. When the berries turn dark purple in colour, be patient - they usually sweeten up and are ready to pick a couple of weeks later.

Haskap are extremely soft berries and crush easily if you hold them too tightly. To harvest them, gently grasp the base of the berry by the thumb and forefinger and tug it from the stem. It should give easily if the berry is ripe. You may wish to wear gloves when harvesting haskap as the juice can easily stain your hands. Haskap berries do not ripen all at the same time on individual shrubs, but the window for harvesting is very small, about one to two weeks. (To extend the harvest, gardeners who want a lot of fruit should plant several different compatible varieties that produce fruit at different times). You also need to move quickly on the harvest to beat the birds to your precious crop!

More than one haskap shrub is needed to produce fruit – a compatible pollinizer is required. (When purchasing haskap shrubs at a garden centre or nursery, check with staff to ensure you have the right ones).

Haskap shrubs typically do not produce much fruit until they are in their third year of growth.



Saskatoon



Like haskap, saskatoons usually start producing a sizeable amount of berries when the plants are about three years old. The fruit does not ripen all at once on the bushes, and the harvest period is roughly three weeks to a month in length.

Saskatoon berries are usually ready to pick in July. The berries are ripe when they are no longer red or green in colour – they should be a uniform dark purple colour. The juice can stain your hands, so wear gloves when picking. If the berries are hard and shrivelled, they are not harvestable.

When ripe, saskatoon berries should be easily pulled away from the stems without breaking the stems or bruising the berries.



Harvesting and Storage Tips for Small Fruit

Remember that fruits such as strawberries, raspberries, haskap, saskatoons, and currants will not ripen further once harvested, so make sure they are completely ready before you pick!

The best time to pick small fruits is in the morning, when temperatures are cool. Harvesting in the heat of the day can make for mushy fruit. Try to choose a dry day to pick; not only will you be more comfortable, but the fruit won't be wet when you want to put it into storage.

Many of these fruits are fragile and soft when fully ripe and they can squish easily. Avoid loading them into deep containers for fear of crushing the bottom layers into juice. Fill shallow containers with a thin or single layer of berries only. This is especially important for haskap and raspberries.

Do not wash berries until you are ready to use them – it increases the risk of damaging the fruit and encourages mould.

Refrigerate your berry harvest as quickly as you can after picking to prevent the rapid deterioration of the fruit. If you don't plan to eat them fresh, freeze or otherwise process them for long-term storage.

One easy way to freeze berries individually is to place a piece of baking parchment on a cookie sheet. Lay the berries out on a single layer on the sheet. Do not cover them. Pop the sheet into the freezer for a minimum of four hours, then remove it. Place the berries into freezer bags and refreeze. This prevents the berries from clumping up, making it easier to get just a few berries out of the bags whenever needed.



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