

Harvesting and Storing Apples

Harvesting apples at the proper stage of development is the first step toward ensuring high quality garden produce that tastes great and stores well. If picked prematurely, apples are likely to be sour, tough, small and poorly colored; if picked overripe, they may develop internal breakdown and store poorly.

To harvest apples correctly, you must be familiar with the term "ground color." Ground color is the color of an apple's skin, disregarding any areas that have become red. In red-fruited cultivars, observe the portion of the apple that faces the interior of the tree. When the ground color of red cultivars changes from leaf green to yellowish green or creamy, the apples are ready to harvest. In yellow cultivars, the ground color becomes golden. Mature apples with a yellowish-green background color are suitable for storage.

Apples that will be eaten immediately may be ripened on the tree. Apples that are to be stored, should be picked when hard but mature: i.e., showing the mature skin color but with a hard flesh. Therefore storage apples will be harvested before fresh eating apples. Most apple cultivars have brown seeds when ready for harvest. However, seeds may become brown several weeks before proper picking maturity. When harvesting, do not remove the stems from apples that will be stored. Be sure to store only apples without bruises, insect or disease damage, cracks, splits, or mechanical injury.

Many cultivars of apples store moderately well under home storage conditions for up to six months. Late maturing varieties are best suited to storage. These apples can be stored in baskets or boxes lined with plastic or foil to help retain moisture. Always sort apples carefully and avoid bruising them. The saying "one bad apple spoils the barrel" is true because apples give off ethylene gas which speeds ripening. When damaged, ethylene is given off more rapidly and will hasten the ripening of other apples in the container. Because of their sugar content, apples can be stored at 30°-32°F without freezing the tissue. In general, apples ripen about four times as fast at 50°F as at 32°F, so they should be kept as close to 32°F as possible for long-term storage. When stored at this temperature, apples may last for up to 6 months.

Apples often pass their odor or flavor to more delicately flavored produce and the ethylene given off by apples can accelerate ripening in other crops. When possible, store apples separately from other fruits and vegetables.