

Harvest Tips: How to maximize the taste of peaches, blackberries, and summer vegetables, June 3-9

While good taste may always be in season, the same cannot be said for seasonal fruits and vegetables. Timing when picking summer crops is key to maximizing their flavor. Since each person's palate is personal, learning more about when to pick is key to fully enjoying your garden's harvest.



*Peaches are ripening across the state. Picking at the “turning” stage can help improve taste.
(Texas A&M AgriLife photo by Michael Miller)*

Two favorite fruits, blackberries and peaches, are now ripening. And while the peach crop may be a bit sparse in the Hill Country, in other regions with enough cold weather, the crop looks very good, said Larry Stein, Ph.D., horticulture specialist at the [Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service](#), Uvalde. Stein said peaches should be picked as they “turn,” meaning as the green on the peach breaks to yellow. Some people prefer softer peaches, so they will leave them on the tree longer. This increases the chance you’ll be sharing, and losing, a part of your crop to birds, however. Stein said you can get the same softness by picking peaches when they turn and then leaving them on your counter for a few days. “There’s a saying that farmers use — ‘sell them or smell them’— that is true for peaches,” he said. “Once they are soft, they do need to be used immediately because peaches don’t last.” Clingstones tend to be the first peaches to ripen in Texas. Clingstone peaches have flesh that clings to the pit, whereas freestone peaches have fruit that easily pulls away from it. Stein said due to the amount of rain some areas of the state received, some peaches have split pits. Pits split because the fruit grows so rapidly that it pulls its own seed apart. “A split pit doesn’t really affect the quality,” Stein said, “But they may be a little harder to eat around or to cut.”



Growing watermelons should be checked daily so they can be picked at the perfect time to maximize taste and sweetness. (Texas A&M AgriLife photo by Laura McKenzie)

When you pick blackberries, let the color be your guide. Blackberries go from green to red to purple and then to a deeper purple. Most people consider the prime taste to be between two stages of purple. The darker the purple, the sweeter the taste. Gardeners need to stay on top of blackberries and, ideally, pick them every day. Stein said some growers are seeing stink bug damage to their blackberries. A white spot on the fruit indicates stink bug damage, but spots can be cut out if the damage is not too extensive. Watermelons are another seasonal favorite that needs to be checked regularly for ripeness. They are usually ready when the bottom portion is yellow-green or even yellow.

Stein said you should harvest tomatoes when they turn from green to the start of breaking a pink tint. “This is the prime time to pick,” he said. “If you leave them on the vine, varmints will find them.” By putting them out on a counter for three to five days, the tomatoes will ripen to a perfect shade and taste. He cautions against refrigerating tomatoes as it will stop or slow the ripening process.

When to pick peppers comes down to personal taste. Whether serranos, jalapenos or bells, peppers may be eaten at any size or color. When green, bell peppers will be the strongest and the taste will mellow as they mature from yellow to red. The amount of heat in hot peppers is dependent on the variety and the growing conditions; harsh conditions can lead to hotter peppers. “Peppers really like hot weather, so gardeners need to be patient,” Stein said. “People often think their pepper plants aren’t producing when it is really just a matter of time.”

When it comes to squash, younger is better. Younger squash has the advantage of being entirely edible. It is with age that squash skin and seeds become tough and hard. Larger squash are often best saved for use in breads. “For the absolute best eating quality, pick your squash

the day after it flowers,” he said. “The smaller the squash, the more flavorful it will be.” Whether white pattypan, zucchini, yellow crookneck or any other summer varieties, Stein recommends cutting squash into two-inch cubes, stemming then and adding a little butter and cheese for a can’t-miss meal.

Younger is also better for green beans, as they will be more tender and flavorful. Preparation is also easier since cutting the stem end off and cooking them whole is all that is required — no need to worry about snapping them.

Sweet corn can be tricky. Once ripe, the sugars in the kernels turn to starch in about three days. Corn kernels left on the plant too long lose the delicious sweetness as more and more of the sugar is converted to starch. Around 20 days after the first silk appears, you’ll be close to harvest time. The silks will turn brown, but the husks will stay green when ripe. You can double-check if it’s ready to be picked by puncturing a kernel with your fingernail, and a milky liquid comes out. Corn is best harvested in the morning and used as soon as possible.

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Texas drought, winter took toll on residential lawn turfgrass, June 10-16

Drought and harsh winter weather has taken a toll on lawns throughout Texas leaving many homeowners wondering what can be done to restore turfgrass this summer. “Last year we experienced severe drought conditions across the state and then winter featured some harsh freezes, particularly in North Texas and down through Central and South Central Texas,” said Young-Ki Jo, [Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service](#) plant pathologist in the [Department of Plant Pathology and Microbiology](#), Bryan-College Station. “Water restrictions during the drought also prevented lawns from getting sufficient moisture to sustain growth. Homeowners can take advantage during the spring by re-sodding or plugging turfgrass. This is the perfect time before it gets too hot.”

Following last summer’s drought, Jo said precipitation returned to create a different type of stress – turfgrass diseases. “This late-season precipitation promoted large patch disease caused by *Rhizoctonia solani*, a common fall disease that infects and decimates turf until plants go completely to winter dormancy,” he said. “During the past summer and fall, turf damage

was more than usual.” Jo said this dead turfgrass is likely visible this spring, and turfgrass sometimes never recovers even with sufficient fertilizer and water. “Fertilizer and water may promote dormant grass to grow but will not make dead plants revive,” he said.

Take-all root rot, a fungal disease by *Gaeumannomyces* species, has also been appearing in Texas lawns among St. Augustine grass, Bermuda grass and zoysia grass varieties. Jo said the fungus survives in soil, roots and stolons for extended periods and infects turfgrass during warm weather and wet soil conditions. “The fungus can be found in unhealthy grasses in damaged turf,” he said. “However, it can also be found in healthy-looking grasses near the same damaged turf area. Drought stress can exacerbate the symptoms of the disease. When turfgrass is already infected with the fungus, drought stress can cause infected plants to rapidly decline, leading to death.” Fortunately, there are many fungicides available to control take-all root rot disease for homeowners. Many of these products labeled for the disease are available at lawn and garden retailers. The best time for application is the spring.

Jo said homeowners need to realize that dead areas of the lawn will not return to normal unless the dead plant material is removed and plugged with new turfgrass and a soil amender. “Also, make sure these newly established areas are well watered,” he said.



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Texas Trailing Phlox, June 17-23

Did you know Polk County is home to an endangered wildflower species? Texas trailing phlox is found in only a very small geographical area of east Texas and nowhere else in the world. This area includes the counties of Hardin, Polk, and Tyler. In fact, Polk County is so important for the continuation of this species that this week's article is dedicated to the federally and state endangered Texas trailing phlox.

Texas trailing phlox has stems that spread horizontally to form a small shrub between 4 to 12 inches tall. The leaves remain on the woody stems year around but this wildflower only blooms from a period from April to June with very showy colors ranging from pink to purple and occasionally even white. There are several other species of phlox in east Texas, but the Texas trailing phlox can be ID by its trailing growth pattern, woody stems, and needle-like leaves.

So why is this wildflower endangered? Texas trailing phlox is endangered because of its limited geographical distribution and loss of habitat. Texas trailing phlox is what we call a fire dependent species and is most associated with the longleaf pine savannah in the three counties it can be found. The species is adapted to grow in open savannah forest which is maintained by fire. The plant dies out once the site becomes overgrown and shaded out by brush such as yaupon and other hardwoods.

Texas trailing phlox can be found on both private and public land within its range. The easiest location for the public to view this species is in the Big Thicket National Preserve. The preserve is home to several populations, including two reintroductions and one introduction.

I hope you have enjoyed learning about Polk County natural heritage. I challenge you to go out and find Texas trailing phlox or other wildflower species in Polk County. You may ask what the benefit to me? Being out in nature improves your mental and physical health and

helps you gain a better understanding of our natural world and the wonders it holds. Plus, you can impress your hiking partner by knowing all the cool facts about Texas trailing phlox.



Image Credit: Sue Wilder - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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Rain Gardens, June 24-30

As the population continues to grow in Texas water issues are becoming an ever occurring issue. Population centers continue to expand into rural areas and with the expansion comes impervious surfaces such as roofs and roads. This results in increased storm runoff leading to additional flooding and increased pollutants in creeks, rivers, bays, and eventually the Gulf of Mexico. Many homeowners may feel that storm runoff is too big of an issue to tackle

individually; however, this is far from the truth. A growing trend is to construct rain gardens to capture and slowly release rainwater which can be built in a backyard. In addition, rain gardens provide other environmental services such as filtering pollutants and replenishing groundwater. Rain gardens are basically areas that collect rainwater and are planted with water tolerant plants that act as a bio-detention system. Rain gardens should hold water up to several days after a rainfall event but should not become a permanent pond. Across rain gardens can enhance the landscape around your house and be aesthetically appealing.

Rain gardens can vary in size and can range from very small gardens in the corner of your backyard where water stands to constructing elaborate rain gardens by creating rain-gathering terraces on slopes. When selecting a site, you should consider incorporating the rain garden into the existing landscape to ensure it is aesthetically appealing. Rain gardens typically consist of three planting zones with the center area being the wettest, inside edge being drier, and the outside margin being the driest. These zones will need to be considered when determining the planting location of plants based on their water requirements. A rain garden can be bordered with landscape material such as gravel, boulders, or mulch. The lowest spot in a rain garden should be 6-8 inches. If an existing low spot meets this requirement, then no excavation is needed. Excavation may be required in some situations especially when developing large rain gardens. Before planting occurs, all sod and weeds should be removed and soil should be prepared, including loosening the soil and adding compost. Mulching is essential in a rain garden as it allows water to penetrate the soil. A good rule of thumb is to add a mulch layer of 3 inches.

Planting native plants are preferred since they require little maintenance and added inputs. Native plants will also act as nectar and host plants for butterflies and hummingbirds. When selecting your plants, you should pick a mixture of trees, shrubs, grasses, and flowers. Trees and shrubs should only be used if space permits. A planting design should consider mature height and width, light requirements, and water requirements. Allow plants to slightly overlap when mature to help block out weeds. Popular trees include southern maple, pawpaw, hawthorn, and possum haw holly. Shrubs can include swamp rose, American elderberry, Turk's cap, and American beautyberry. A plethora of wildflower options exist and include red columbine, spider lily, blue flag iris, Maximilian daisy, and purple coneflower. Don't forget to add grasses such as gulf muhly grass, switchgrass, inland sea oats, and indian grass. Lastly' southern maidenhair fern, wood fern, sensitive fern, and royal fern can add some unique characteristics.

Rain gardens are a way to improve the landscaping in your yard, especially in wet or low spots, while providing valuable environmental services. In addition to being aesthetically appealing rain gardens are relatively maintenance free after the initial planting.

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