

Enjoy the HARVEST

How and when should you pick your fruit, and what do you do with it afterwards? Gardening expert and writer **Naomi Slade** has the answers

Judging what point is best for harvest – and what you can get away with – can make the difference between success and failure; between sneaking a pleasurable meal from an unprepossessing source or wondering if you have let a free lunch go to waste.

Fruit varies. Cherries are best picked at the peak of ripeness, and enjoyed or preserved immediately. Pears are generally better plucked before they are fully ripe – kept safe from pecking beaks – then consumed at perfection, and not a moment later. Damsons and sloes tend to benefit from a late harvest, but apples can be picked and eaten fresh for a full four months of the year.

Different varieties, meanwhile, exhibit substantial differences in how well they store. The best thing to do is to become familiar with your trees: keep visiting them and testing the fruit. Soon you will get to know their internal clock.

HOW DO YOU KNOW THE FRUIT IS RIPE?

The main season for pome fruit (which is apples, pears, quinces, medlars and certain other members of the rose family, like hawthorn) runs from late summer to early winter, so gardens or orchards often have several types of tree to span the season. Timing is influenced by weather and temperature, and fruit will ripen faster in sun than shade, but when a fruit peaks is predominantly down to its variety.

The first indication of ripeness is increased attention from birds and the appearance of a few windfalls under the tree (unless it is in a grazed field, in which case the animals take to waiting underneath, Hoovering up the evidence, while you wonder why the fruit seems to be so late this year).

The fruit mellows into its final colour, from greenish to warmer tones of yellow, orange or red, or richer hues of purple, particularly where it catches the sun. This does not yet mean perfection, but it is a good time to start checking. Cup it in your hand and give it a gentle twist. Ripe fruit will come away from the tree easily; if it puts up any significant resistance, it's not ready yet. With stone fruit, select a likely candidate and gently squeeze. If it yields a little, it is getting there, but if it's as hard as a bullet, try again in a few days. If in doubt, taste it. While some fruit may be naturally sharp, ripeness brings notes of sweetness and a mellowness of flavour that is absent earlier.

Finally, the seeds of apples and pears turn brown as they ripen. This happens fairly late on, but if you cut one open and the seeds are green or white, it isn't ready. If the seeds are brown or black, the fruit can be picked with confidence.



This crab apple in my north-facing front garden catches the evening sun on the left hand side, where the fruit is noticeably riper than on the more shaded right

WHEN AND HOW TO PICK

Not all the fruit on a tree ripens at once – the top of the tree and the sunny side will be ready to harvest first – which means that it can be picked twice, if not three times. If you leave the earliest-ripening fruit until the ones at the bottom and in the shade are ready, you'll lose them to birds or they'll drop off and bruise. So pick them when they are ready, then leave it a week before returning.

With stone fruit there is a perfect point between 'hard enough to bounce off the floor' and 'melts into mush in the bag' – the fruit must be ripe, but firm enough to survive handling. The alternative is an unintended purée situation.

Some fruit is better picked before it is fully ripe and allowed mature off the tree. It will also store better and is less subject to damage in transit. Pears are the classic example: although initially hard as a rock, in the fruit bowl or on a warm windowsill they will very soon mellow. This treatment can also help to rescue a meagre plum harvest.



Safely stored on the kitchen windowsill, pears can be eaten as they ripen



When the pips are black, the fruit is ripe

HOW TO PICK A TREE

Certain items will make the job of harvesting more efficient. The following are essential:

- A bag to pick the fruit into (you can get specialist soft bags designed for the job, but a carrier bag will do).
- A trug or other container to empty the bag into.
- Boxes. You can store apples and other fruit in any cardboard, wooden or plastic mesh box that will allow the fruit to breathe.

OTHER THINGS ARE OPTIONAL BUT USEFUL:

- A ladder is handy if your tree is tall and tangled. An ordinary ladder is fine, or you can buy specially designed fruit-pickers' ladders.
- A long-handled picker. This is basically a basket or bag at the end of a long stick. It works best when the fruit is both reasonably sized and well spaced, otherwise in the capturing of one lofty fruit you will knock another two off. Practice helps, as does a steady hand and a strong bicep.
- Children. If you have large and scruffy trees it is hard to beat giving a child a bag and sending him or her aloft. This creates an exciting sense of freedom and purpose. And it is actually quite hard to fall out of an overgrown apple tree.



Caption 2

■ **Note:** Of course, safety precautions should always be observed. This is especially relevant in community and commercial orchards for which, in the UK, the Work at Height Regulations 2005 will apply.

EARLY VARIETIES FOR EATING AND COOKING

APPLES

Eaters: 'Discovery', 'Katy', 'Devonshire Quarrenden', 'Greensleeves', 'Beauty of Bath', 'Scrumptious'. **Cookers:** 'Grenadier', 'Reverend W Wilkes', 'Scotch Dumpling'.

PEARS

'Beth' is best eaten off the tree! 'Williams Bon Chrétien' and 'Conference' keep quite well in the fridge, while 'Merton Pride' and 'Thompson's' will last a few weeks.

LATER VARIETIES FOR STORING

APPLES

Eaters: 'Granny Smith', 'Jonagold', 'Winston', 'Laxton's Fortune', 'Pixie', 'American Mother', 'Saturn'. **Cookers:** 'Bramley's Seedling', 'Lane's Prince Albert', 'Blenheim Orange', 'Edward VII'.

PEARS

'Concorde', 'Invincible', 'Catillac' (a stewing pear), 'Onward' and 'Doyenne du Comice' will store well if picked underripe.



'Devonshire Quarrendon' is an early eating apple

HARVESTING ANOMALIES

To optimize palatability, some fruit should be dealt with in certain ways:

- Medlars, once picked, should be left until they are 'bletted' – soft and squidgy – before consuming.
- Sloes should, ideally, be picked after the first frost softens the skins. If frost is late, pick them when ripe and put them in the freezer overnight.

GRADING, PACKING AND MOVING

Once the fruit is at ground level, you will need to grade it and pack it into boxes, for transport to wherever it will live while waiting to be consumed. First remove all fruit that is damaged or deteriorating. Anything that is pecked, bruised or wormy will not last long and needs to be used up as fast as possible.

The good-quality fruit should be packed into breathable boxes. Banana boxes from supermarkets are good (although they can get pretty heavy when full), or you can make or buy smart wooden storage trays. The shallow mushroom boxes that are sometimes thrown out by pubs and restaurants are useful – with several layers of fruit in each, they stack well and they are a good size for carrying. Take care not to pack fruit so high or densely that the lower ones are crushed.

Pack and stack storage containers in such a way that there is movement of air between and within them. This reduces the build-up of both condensation and of ethylene gas, which is emitted by ripe fruit and serves to ripen it further.

WHERE TO STORE YOUR FRUIT

Pick a spot that is cool, dark, well ventilated, frost-free and mouse-free. Sheds, garages and cellars are ideal for stacking crates of fruit, while smaller quantities can be kept in the fridge as you would salad, either loose or in plastic bags pierced with holes to stop the fruit sweating. The RHS recommends a temperature of 2.7-7C (37-45F) for apples and even cooler for pears,



Perforated plastic trays or slatted wooden boxes allow good air movement around the fruit.



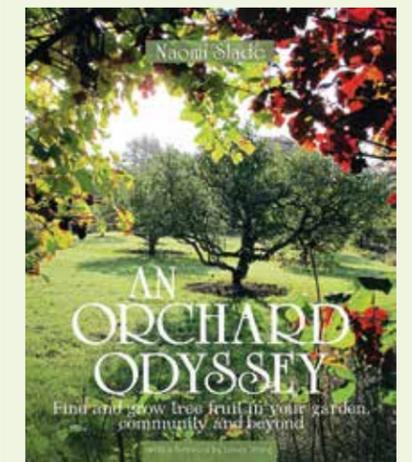
Medlars are traditionally eaten mashed up with sugar and cream, used as pie filling or simply baked and eaten with a spoon

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if possible. It is important that temperature and humidity are reasonably consistent. Freezing and thawing will spoil the fruit, and if kept too dry it will gradually desiccate. It is also important to keep stored fruit away from strong smells such as paint, white spirit, onions or anything else that might transfer its flavour in an undesirable fashion.



The birds will let you know when your apples are ripening by eating the best ones first!