

# Top 13 vegetables to donate to food pantries

Many gardeners produce excess vegetables during the growing season. Some preserve their surplus vegetables for later use, while others give friends and neighbors the extras. Another option for using this excess produce could be a local food pantry. One in eight lowans is considered "food insecure" and many of these individuals frequently visit food pantries for assistance. Donating a garden's bounty to a local food pantry is a great way to help those in need in local communities.

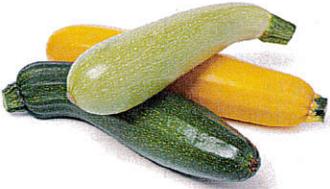
## Making the most of a donation

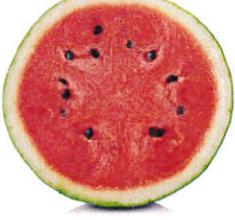
Not all food pantries accept fresh produce. Some don't have the space or refrigeration to store fresh vegetables for long periods. Contact a nearby food pantry early in the growing season to find out if they accept fresh

produce. Also ask which days are best for dropping off fresh vegetables as some food pantries are only open on certain days. Ideally, harvest and deliver vegetables right before patrons arrive to pick them up. This way they will be selected and eaten when they are in peak condition.

## Preferred vegetables

While food pantries that accept fresh produce will accept most types of vegetables, the following are generally preferred. These vegetables are recognizable to most clients, simple to prepare, used in many different ways, and can be stored at least one or two days without refrigeration. Additionally, these vegetables are easy to grow and harvest, making them perfect candidates for donation.

Crop	Overview	Days to maturity	Culture/harvest tips	Cleaning
<b>Tomato</b> 	Red tomatoes of all shapes and sizes are appreciated as donations. Look for varieties that are disease and crack resistant.	70-90 days	Stake or cage plants to keep fruit off the ground and reduce disease. Avoid donating damaged or cracked tomatoes.	Wash gently to remove any dirt.
<b>Zucchini</b> 	Many gardeners have extra zucchini during the summer. This versatile home vegetable is generally welcomed at food pantries.	55-60 days	Harvest every 2-3 days to keep zucchini relatively small (6-10 inches long). Avoid donating damaged or oversized zucchini.	Wash gently to remove any dirt.
<b>Winter Squash</b> 	Butternut and acorn squash are less common vegetables to find at food pantries, but they will store for long periods and are nutritious.	90-120 days	Harvest winter squash when fruit are fully mature. Mature fruit have hard skins and dull-looking surfaces.	Gently wipe off excess dirt.

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<p><b>Potato</b></p> 	<p>Potatoes are another versatile vegetable. They can be used in a variety of recipes and can be stored for long periods. New potatoes and fully mature potatoes are accepted at many food pantries.</p>	<p>100-140 days</p>	<p>Plant seed pieces early (mid- to late April). Harvest new potatoes in June or July and fully mature potatoes in August or September when the tops wither and die.</p>	<p>Gently brush off excess dirt and allow potatoes to dry or start to "cure" for several days before donating.</p>
<p><b>Onion</b></p> 	<p>As a staple in many recipes, onions are appreciated at food pantries regardless of color or size. Onion tops or greens are also edible, but the dried bulbs are best for donation as they keep longer.</p>	<p>90-120 days</p>	<p>Plant sets in mid- to late April. Wait until tops yellow and die before harvesting. Avoid donating onions that are sprouting or soft because they will not store well.</p>	<p>Gently wipe off excess dirt. Allow bulbs to dry for a couple of days before donating.</p>
<p><b>Pepper</b></p> 	<p>Bell and sweet peppers are appreciated as donations. Double check with food pantries before donating large quantities of hot peppers.</p>	<p>70-75 days</p>	<p>Peppers can be harvested when full size but also when immature (green) or allowed to ripen to red, orange, or yellow.</p>	<p>Wash gently to remove any dirt. Refrigerate if storing more than a day before donating.</p>
<p><b>Cucumber</b></p> 	<p>Cucumbers are very productive vegetables. Slicing cucumbers are preferred as donations more so than pickling types.</p>	<p>50-70 days</p>	<p>Harvest every 2-3 days to keep cucumbers small (6-9 inches long). Avoid donating damaged or oversized fruit.</p>	<p>Wash gently to remove any dirt.</p>
<p><b>Melon</b></p> 	<p>Muskmelons and watermelons are often welcomed at food pantries, yet large melons can be heavy and difficult to carry with a bag of groceries.</p>	<p>75-110 days</p>	<p>Harvest when ripe. Avoid donating cracked or split fruit.</p>	<p>Wipe rinds thoroughly with a moist, soft cloth to remove any dirt.</p>

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<b>Broccoli</b> 	Broccoli is one of the earlier crops ready for donation. It is also highly valued for its nutrition and versatility.	60-80 days	Broccoli transplants can be planted in the garden in mid- to late April. After harvesting the main crop in June or early July, allow side shoots to develop for an extended harvest later in the season.	Wash thoroughly and drain to remove dirt. Refrigerate if storing more than a day before donating.
<b>Cabbage</b> 	Green or red cabbage is appreciated at food banks. One medium-sized cabbage head can easily feed a family either raw or cooked. Compared to other leafy greens, cabbage also stores well when refrigerated.	60-100 days	Plant cabbage in the garden in mid- to late April. Harvest large, firm heads sometime in late June through July, or in fall for full-season types.	Wash gently to remove any dirt. Don't remove more than one or two of the outer, protective leaves before donating. Refrigerate if storing more than a day before donating.
<b>Sweet potato</b> 	Orange flesh sweet potatoes are one of the most nutritious vegetables available. The tuberous roots store well for long periods, making it a great vegetable for donation.	120-140 days	Plant slips in the garden in mid- to late May. Vines take a long time to develop sizable roots. To allow maximum growing time, wait to harvest until frost has damaged or killed the vines.	Gently brush off excess dirt and allow potatoes to dry or "cure" for a several days to thicken the outer skin.
<b>Carrot</b> 	Carrots are a nutritious and fun vegetable to grow. While carrots are available in many colors, orange is preferred for donations to food banks.	60-80 days	Sow seeds in mid- to late April and thin as needed. Carrots are ready to harvest when the roots are large and the top of the root is slightly elevated.	Remove tops and wash gently to remove any dirt. Refrigerate if storing more than a day before donating.
<b>Beans</b> 	Since ten feet of bush beans can yield over six pounds of beans, it is easy to have a lot of beans quickly in the garden!	50-60 days	Stagger plantings of bush beans 3 weeks apart to extend harvest. Harvest once beans are pencil-size in diameter. Continue harvesting every 2-3 days to keep plants productive.	Wash gently to remove any dirt. Refrigerate beans immediately after harvest.

## Lasting Impressions

This publication includes the top vegetable recommendations from the Iowa Food Bank Association. This does not imply that other vegetables that didn't make this list would not be accepted. When contacting a local food pantry, ask which vegetables their clients prefer. This information will help make decisions about planting a section of a garden specifically for donation to the pantry.

Encourage eating of fresh vegetables by providing high quality produce. Tomatoes with cracks or spots, nicked potatoes, scorched peppers, or sprouting onions may not be taken by clients. While "ugly" produce may be perfectly edible and nutritious, remember that many food pantries don't have the facilities to keep or store produce that isn't taken immediately. Food safety also becomes an issue when produce is damaged or diseased. Perhaps the donation will entice clients to grow some of their own vegetables next year!

To find a nearby food pantry, visit [AmpleHarvest.org](http://AmpleHarvest.org).

For more specifics on growing vegetables, check out these publications by Iowa State University Extension and Outreach:

Where to Put Your Vegetable Garden PM 814  
<https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/4125>

Suggested Vegetable Varieties for the Home Garden  
PM 607 <https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/3980>

Planting a Home Vegetable Garden PM 819  
<https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/4134>

Small Plot Vegetable Gardening PM 870A  
<https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/4177>

Planting and Harvesting Times for Garden Vegetables  
PM 534 <https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/3960>

Tomatoes PM 608  
<https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/3981>

Potatoes PM 1890  
<https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/5483>

Onions PM 1889  
<https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/5481>

Melons PM 1892  
<https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/5487>

Peppers PM 1888  
<https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/5479>

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