

How to Store Your Garden Vegetables

By Kate O'Lenic

Getting the most out of your garden includes storing your crops under the best conditions so they stay fresh the longest. Some crops can be stored for 1 week or up to several months. Here is a summary of what will work best for the most popular vegetables from the home garden.

Harvest healthy, fully ripe produce, free of severe insect damage or disease. Most vegetables store better and lose less moisture if at least an inch of stem is left on. It is also important to store fruit in a separate location than vegetables. Fruit release ethylene which speeds ripening of vegetables and fruit can also pick up the taste of vegetables stored near them.

A dark, well-ventilated area is best for storage. Also, temperature and humidity have a significant effect on length of storage. Different storage conditions for your produce include:

- Cold, moist: 32-40°F and 95% relative humidity, ideally a crisper drawer in the refrigerator that is at least half full or in containers or plastic bags on a refrigerator shelf
- Cold, dry: 32-40°F and 65% relative humidity, a refrigerator shelf
- Cool, dry: 50-60°F and 60% relative humidity, possibly a basement area with good air circulation
- Cool, moist: 40-50°F and 80-95% relative humidity, a basement or insulated garage with a method of keeping humidity high.

Short-term Storage

Tomatoes

When stored under cool, moist conditions, ripe tomatoes will stay fresh for 4 to 7 days. A basement or insulated garage may work for tomatoes. Alternatively, store tomatoes at room temperature and out of direct sunlight.

Lettuce, Kale, Collard Greens

Cold, moist storage is needed to keep these items fresh. Rinsing the leaves before storage is debatable. If too much water is left on the leaves, it may hasten spoilage. If you decide to rinse the leaves, be sure to thoroughly drain them and pat dry before storing. Collards and kale may keep for up to 7 days. Lettuce can stay fresh up to 5 days under ideal conditions. Storage time depends greatly on the condition of the produce.

Peppers, Cucumbers, Ripe Melons, Summer Squash and Zucchini

These will keep in the refrigerator on a shelf for up to 7 days.

Long-term Storage

Back in the day, root cellars were popular for storing certain vegetables. These days, a second refrigerator is a good investment for storing your extra crops. Another idea is to create insulated containers to store produce in a shed or on the porch. There are a lot of ways to store crops. See the references at the end of this article for more information.

Potatoes

Harvest potatoes for long-term storage after the tops have died and are dried out. The late-maturing varieties are best for keeping longer. Brush soil off the potatoes. Any damaged potatoes should be used soon. Cure for about 1 to 2 weeks in a warm (60-75 degree F), moist, dark area. Then move them to a cool, moist area. Often a basement will serve this purpose. Potatoes can keep for 2 to 9 months depending on the variety and storage conditions.

Garlic, Shallots and Onions

Harvest when fully matured, after the tops have fallen over and browned. The stiff-necked garlic tops won't fall, but they will turn brown. Cure over 2 to 3 weeks by spreading them in a single layer in a moderately warm, dry area with good air circulation. When cured, cut the tops back to about 1 inch. You can keep yellow onions in mesh bags for 6 to 7 months in cool, dry conditions. Red, white, and sweet onions keep for a shorter length of time.

Carrots

Harvest the carrots for long-term (4 to 5 months) storage in late fall before the ground freezes. The soil can be rinsed off, but do not scrub the carrots. Dry the carrots and store in a refrigerator in perforated plastic bags. You can also store carrots right where they are growing by covering them with a thick layer of straw before the ground freezes.

Winter Squash and Pumpkins

Harvest these goodies before the first frost when fully mature, with hardened rinds and a good, deep color. Leave 3 inches of stem on pumpkins and 2 inches on winter squash. If stems have broken off, use the fruit soon. They won't keep without the stem. Cure these crops at 80 to 85 degrees for 7 to 10 days. Acorn squash are the exception and do not require curing. Afterwards, store in a cool, dry area with good air circulation. These should keep for 2 to 6 months.

References:

“Storage Guidelines for Fruits & Vegetables,”

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https://vric.ucdavis.edu/pdf/potatoes/potato_storage.pdf

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“Storage of Home-Grown Vegetables,”

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“Storage of Vegetable Crops,” https://ag.umass.edu/sites/ag.umass.edu/files/fact-sheets/pdf/storage_of_vegetable_crops.pdf

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