



Harvesting and Storing Vegetables

Harvesting fresh vegetables from your home garden is a very rewarding experience. The home-grown flavor and freshness cannot be rivaled by store bought produce. Harvesting some crops at peak ripeness can be tricky. Improper handling and storage can cause harvested vegetables to spoil more quickly. This information is designed to help you get the most out of your vegetable harvest.

Proper storage of vegetable crops requires the proper combination of temperature and humidity. Some crops, such as winter squash and pumpkins, prefer cool and dry conditions (50-60°F and 60% relative humidity). Onions and garlic will stay fresh longest when kept cold and dry (32-40°F and 65% relative humidity). Cold and dry conditions are found in refrigerators. Green leafy vegetable and root crops prefer cold and moist conditions (32-40°F and 95% relative humidity). Cold and moist conditions are not easy to maintain (most refrigerators are too dry). Cucumbers, peppers, tomatoes, eggplant, summer squash, and other summer vegetable “fruits” require cool (55°F) and moist storage.

When harvesting vegetables, be careful not to break, nick, or bruise them. Handling harvested vegetables generally decreases their shelf-life. Harvest only vegetables of high quality. Rotting produce cannot be stored for very long, and could spread decay organisms to other stored vegetables. Several common crops are listed below with their harvesting and storage requirements.

Asparagus: not harvested until the third year after planting, store cool and moist, will last longer if stored upright.

Beets: harvest when they are 1¼ to 3 inches in diameter, remove tops, store cold and moist, can last up to 5 months.

Cabbage: harvest when heads are compact and firm, store cold and moist, can last up to 5 months.

Cantaloupe: harvest when fruits are firm, netting is even, and they slip off the vine easily. They can be stored for one week if kept cold and moist.

Carrots: harvest when tops are one inch across, remove tops, store cold and moist, can last up to 8 months.

Cucumbers: harvest for slicing when 6 inches long, store cool in perforated plastic bags. Do not store with apples or tomatoes as they produce ethylene gas which hastens ripening and will cause cucumbers and other vegetable “fruits” to spoil faster.

Eggplant: harvest while fruit still feels “waxy” and before the color becomes dull. Store like cucumbers.

Green beans: harvest when seeds are immature (2-3 weeks after bloom), can last one week if stored cold and moist.

Onions: harvest when necks are tight and scales are dry. They should be cured at room temperature for 2-4 weeks then store cold and dry.

Potatoes: harvest when vines die back, stored cold and moist, keep away from light, cured at 50-60°F or 14 days before storage, will sweeten below 38°F.

Peppers: harvest when fruits are desired size and/or color, store like cucumbers, can last for two weeks.

Pumpkins and winter squash: harvest when shells harden, before frost, store cool and dry, and will store for at least 2 months (depending on variety).

Summer squash: harvest when 4 to 6 inches long, store like cucumbers, can last for one week.

Sweet corn: harvest when the silks are dry and brown and kernels are milky, and if stored cold and moist can stay very fresh for 5 days.

Tomatoes: harvest when fruits are desired size and/or color, store like cucumbers, can last for 5 days.

Watermelon: harvest when underside turns from white to yellow or produces dull sound when slapped, store cool and moist, can last for two weeks.

Enjoy your garden harvest. Some crops can be stored in heavy plastic bags and frozen (ripe tomatoes) or blanched and frozen (green beans and corn). Others can be preserved by home canning. When canning vegetables, fruits, and other crops, make sure you are following recommended food safety guidelines.

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