

June - Storing Produce for Flavor and Longer Shelf Life

By Rita Bricker

Have you become a backyard gardener because of the coronavirus pandemic? Many of us have turned to growing our own food for a number of reasons. Maybe it's because you had more time on your hands. Perhaps you weren't making as many trips to the grocery store. Or you were looking for a healthy activity to enjoy with your children at home.

Whatever the reason, now is the time of year that harvesting your warm weather produce will start in earnest. And it is important to know how to store homegrown, as well as store-bought, vegetables and fruits this time of year for maximum freshness and shelf life and to reduce food waste.

First, know that harvesting your own vegetables and fruits is best done in the morning when the water content is at its peak. And some, but not all, produce should be washed before storing it. Moreover, not all produce should be refrigerated. So, let's look at some specifics.

Tomatoes, everyone's favorite homegrown food (actually a fruit), should be stored at room temperature on your counter for best flavor and juiciness. Potatoes should be stored in a cool, dark place with plenty of air circulation. But do not store potatoes with garlic or onions, both of which produce ethylene gas as part of the ripening process.

Many fruits also produce ethylene but can be kept at room temperature while ripening then transferred to the refrigerator for longer-term storage. This list includes apricots, plums, peaches, avocados, and nectarines. Apples, however, should go straight into the crisper in your refrigerator to retain their texture.

Citrus also does best when stored in the refrigerator, as do grapes, berries, cucumbers, peppers, eggplant, summer squash and zucchini. But if you overplanted zucchini as I did, you won't have enough refrigerator space to hold it all, so give some to your neighbors! If you buy mushrooms, they should be stored unwashed in the refrigerator for best flavor. But remove the plastic wrap if you keep mushrooms in their original container to keep them from getting slimy.

Lettuces and other leafy greens may also be stored unwashed in sealed containers or plastic zip-top bags to retain their crispness. However, they must be washed immediately before use!

Brassica or cruciferous vegetables are cool season crops when grown at home but are available all year-round in our grocery stores. This group includes cauliflower, cabbage, broccoli, kale, bok choy, and brussels sprouts. These vegetables should be refrigerated in sealed containers.

Enjoy the fruits (and vegetables) of your labor longer by storing them properly.

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