Denny McKeown's BLOOMIN Garden Centre & Landscaping
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Tip Sheets

Harvesting and Storing Home Garden Vegetables

When harvesting vegetables, be careful not to break, nick, or bruise them. The less vegetables are handled, the longer they will last in storage. Harvest only vegetables of high quality. Rotting produce cannot be stored for very long, and could spread disease to other stored vegetables.

Different vegetables need different storage conditions. Temperature and humidity are the main storage factors to consider; there are three combinations for long-term storage:

1. **Cool and dry** (50-60°F and 60% relative humidity)
2. **Cold and dry** (32-40°F and 65% relative humidity)
3. **Cold and moist** (32-40°F and 95% relative humidity)

For cold conditions, 32°F is the optimal temperature, but it isn't easy to attain in most homes. Expect shortened shelf-lives for your vegetables as storage conditions deviate from the optimal, as much as 25% for every 10°F increase in temperature. Some vegetables, such as cucumbers, peppers, and tomatoes, require cool (55°F) and moist storage. These conditions are difficult to maintain in a typical home, so expect to keep vegetables requiring cool and moist storage conditions for only a short period of time.

Where can the different storage conditions be found in a typical home? Basements are generally cool and dry. If storing vegetables in basements, provide your vegetables with some ventilation. Harvested vegetables are not dead, but still "breathe" and require oxygen to maintain their high quality. Also, be sure they are protected from rodents.

Home refrigerators are generally cold and dry (40°F and 50-60% relative humidity). This is fine for long-term storage of garlic and onions, but not much else. Putting vegetables in perforated plastic bags in the refrigerator will provide cold and moist conditions, but only for a moderate amount of time. Unperforated plastic bags often create too humid conditions that lead to condensation and growth of mold or bacteria.

Root cellars provide cold and moist conditions. As with basements, provide ventilation and protection from rodents when storing vegetables in cellars. Materials such as straw, hay, or wood shavings can be used as an insulation. If using such insulation, make sure it is clean and not contaminated with pesticides.

Specific harvest and storage information for some commonly-grown vegetables is below. Expected shelf-life times are only estimates.

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Vegetable	When to Harvest	How to Store	Expected Shelf-life	Comments
Asparagus	3rd year after planting when spears are 6-9 inches long	Cold and moist	2 weeks	Keep upright
Basil	When leaves are still tender	At room temperature	5 days	Keep stems in water; will discolor if kept in refrigerator for 10 days
Beans, snap	About 2-3 weeks after bloom when seeds still immature	Cold and moist	1 week	Develop pitting if stored below 40°
Beets	When 1.25-3 inches in diameter	Cold and moist	5 months	Store without tops
Broccoli	While flower buds still tight and green	Cold and moist	2 weeks	
Brussel sprouts	When head's 1 inch in diameter	Cold and moist	1 month	
Cabbage	When head is compact and firm	Cold and moist	5 months	
Carrots	When tops 1 inch in diameter	Cold and moist	8 months	Store without tops
Cauliflower	While head is still white, before curds "ricey"	Cold and moist	3 weeks	
Corn, sweet	When silks dry and brown, kernels should be milky when cut with a thumbnail	Cold and moist	5 days	
Cucumbers	For slicing, when 6 inches long	Cool spot in kitchen 55°F in perforated plastic bags; storage in refrigerator for a few days okay	1 week	Develops pitting and water-soaked areas if chilled below 40°F; do not store with apples or tomatoes

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Vegetable	When to Harvest	How to Store	Expected Shelf-life	Comments
Eggplant	Before color dulls	Like cucumbers	1 week	Develops pitting, bronzing, pulp browning if stored for long period below 50°F
Kohlrabi	When 2-3 inches in diameter	Cold and moist	2 months	Store without tops
Lettuce	While leaves are tender	Cold and moist	1 week	
Muskmelons (cantaloupe)	When fruits slip off vine easily, while netting even, fruit firm	Cold and moist	1 week	Develops pitting surface decay with slight freezing
Onions	When necks are tight, scales dry	Cold and dry	4 months	Cure at room temperature 2-4 weeks before storage, don't freeze
Parsnips	When roots reach desired size, possibly after light frost	Cold and moist	4 months	Do not wax or allow roots to freeze; sweetens after 2 weeks at 32°F
Peas	When pods are still tender	Cold and moist	1 week	
Peppers	When fruits reach desired size or color	Like cucumbers	2 weeks	Develops pitting below 45°F
Potatoes	When vine dies back	Cold and moist; keep away from light	6 months	Cure at 50-60°F or 14 days before storage, will sweeten below 38°F
Pumpkins	When shells harden, before frost	Cool and dry	2 months	Very sensitive to temperatures below 45°F
Radishes	When roots up to 1.25 inches in diameter	Cold and moist	1 month	Store without tops
Rutabagas	When roots reach desired size	Cold and moist	4 months	Do not wax

Vegetable	When to Harvest	How to Store	Expected Shelf-life	Comments
Spinach	While leaves are still tender	Cold and moist	10 days	
Squash, summer	When fruit are 4-6 inches long	Like cucumbers	1 week	Do not store in refrigerator for more than 4 days
Squash, winter	When shells harden, before frost	Cool and dry	2-6 months, depending on variety	Curing unnecessary; do not cure Table Queen
Tomatoes, red	When color uniformly pink or red	Like cucumbers	5 days	Loses color, firmness and flavor if stored below 40°F; do not refrigerate!
Turnips	When roots reach desired size, possibly after light frost	Cold and moist	4 months	Can be waxed
Watermelons	When underside turns yellow or produces dull sound when slapped	Like cucumbers	2 weeks	Will decay if stored below 50°F for more than a few days

Source: Cindy Tong, Extension post-harvest horticulturist