# Storing Produce

The concept of a root cellar may seem outdated, but Mike and Nancy Bubel's classic book, **Root Cellaring**, has a chapter for all of us - "Food Cellars for Everyone". Among the outdoor methods for storing produce that they propose are: garden row storage, hay bale fortresses, plant protection tents, mounds, storage trenches, and wood box safes. Earth pits and buried drain tiles (or covered metal cans or barrels) and even the buried refrigerator (minus the motor, shelves, crisper drawers and lock) figure in this chapter, too. If none of these appeal, and you have no outbuildings, the Bubels help you examine your house to see if there is an unsuspected nook or cranny that can be used for produce storage.

The book **Putting Food By**, by Ruth Hertzberg and others, has an eleven-page chapter on "Root-cellaring", with pictures, diagrams, charts and details about specific fruits and vegetables.

Most of us who garden have a surfeit of some vegetable or fruit come fall. Here are some ideas to help you keep that excess as long as possible without losing quality.

**APPLES** should be picked, with stem left on, when they are "firm ripe" and stored at 33–40 degrees F, 85 percent humidity. Don't store any damaged or dirty fruit. The sooner you get them into storage, the longer they'll last. A refrigerator is the best place for storage. If it is a frost-free refrigerator, put the apples in plastic bags. Apples individually wrapped in paper (to decrease oxygen intake) and stored in a tightly closed container in a frost-free location, are reputed to keep well.

**BEETS** may be kept in well-drained garden soil all winter, mulched well with straw up to 6 inches deep, but they may become woody, and rodent damage may occur. Harvest beets before the stems elongate for bloom or before the ground freezes, twisting off all but an inch of the tops, since cutting causes "bleeding". Since they lose moisture easily, store beets in layers, in moist sand or peat, in a frost-free place such as a cool shed or cellar.

**CABBAGE** may be harvested when the heads are firm. To delay the splitting caused by the plant's uptake of water, twist the mature head about two-thirds around to break and loosen roots. Cabbage may be stored fresh in a moist dark place just above 32 degrees F.

**CARROTS** should be harvested when they are 3/4 to 1-1/2 inches across (assuming a main crop, medium-sized variety). They can become woody if they are left in the ground after reaching maturity. Only mature carrots store well. Cut off all but an inch of the leaves, placing them in a perforated but closed plastic bag in the refrigerator's vegetable drawer. If the drawer has a humidity control, set it at the highest possible level. Carrots may also be stored in a root cellar, but apart from apples and pears, which emit ethylene gas which makes the carrots bitter.

**CUCUMBERS** and **EGGPLANT** quickly dry out and deteriorate in quality if they are not refrigerated (in a paper bag, in the crisper drawer) after harvest.

**DRY BEANS** should be picked after pods have yellowed but before they begin to shatter. Wash, then air-dry completely. When the beans are thoroughly dry, put them in the freezer for 24 hours to kill weevils and then store them in tightly closed glass or ceramic containers.

When **GARLIC** tops start yellowing, stop watering. Especially in rainy climates, you may need to knock them over to start the drying process. Three weeks later, dig them up and dry them on newspapers in a shaded place. Trim off the tops and roots and store the garlic at 32 to 40 degrees F and 50 to 60 percent humidity. (A refrigerator is too damp; a typical room in a house is too dry.)

**LEEKS** are ready for use when they reach an inch in diameter. They may be left in the ground until ready to use.

**ONIONS** and **SHALLOTS** should be sun-dried for 72 hours before being stored indoors. As they emit ethylene gas (which encourages potatoes to sprout and carrots to turn bitter), keep them separate from those two vegetables. The firm, pungent, storage type of onion will keep for months in a cool dry basement and even longer in a root cellar. Territorial says that their onion Copra is the "unequaled leader in hard storage types", and keeps well until spring. A local (Clark County) master gardener who has grown it, attests to its keeping qualities, comparing it to the "yellow onions you find in the store". The sweet mild types don't keep well, so chop and freeze them or dry them and then convert them to onion flakes or powder using a blender or food processor.

**PARSNIPS** keep well in the ground up until spring "resprouting", or in a root cellar.

**HOT PEPPERS** which have reached full size and mature coloring (red, yellow or green, depending on the variety), can be strung up and air dried like herbs.

**POTATOES** should be dug gently with a spading fork about two weeks after the vines have died. Store in a dark, humid place at about 40 degrees F. Exposure to light should be avoided because it can cause potatoes to turn green, which can mean that solanine, which is not good in large doses, is present. Potatoes should not be stored near apples, unless the apples are well covered, or the apples may acquire a"musty" quality. The apples in turn give off ethylene gas, which promotes sprouting in the potatoes.

**SUMMER (soft-skinned) SQUASH** may be stored where temperatures don't drop below 50 degrees F.

**WINTER (hard-skinned) SQUASH** and **PUMPKINS** should be cut with one inch of stem after the vine dries up. Cure winter squash or pumpkins by exposing them to sun for about 10 days (covering them at night if frost threatens) or to indoor temperatures of 81–90 degrees F for about 4 days. Acorn squash don't need curing. Wash, air dry thoroughly, then store completely undamaged specimens in a cool, dry, dark room at about 50 degrees F. Don't let them freeze.

**TOMATOES** which are firm but showing their mature color, stored in a dry place between 55 and 70 degrees F, should keep up to six weeks. When the first killing frost threatens, pick all tomatoes of good size, carefully remove their stems, wash them and let them dry before you store them. Separate green tomatoes from those which are ripe. Ripen the green ones indoors, out of direct sun, where temperatures will consistently remain above 50 degrees F. They may be packed no more than two deep in shallow boxes or trays with dry leaves, hay, straw or shredded paper. (Some people wrap each tomato in newspaper.) Avoid plastic bags, even those with air holes, as they are more likely to encourage decay. Sort stored tomatoes weekly, removing the faster-ripening ones for use.

## References


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Territorial Seed Company