

Storing Vegetables

With the first frost just around the corner, many people harvest and store their produce for later use. Many fruits and vegetables can be canned, pickled, dried or frozen. For more information, contact the Extension office at 435-753-6262. Here I will address how to store veggies fresh.

Tomatoes are among the most common vegetables and are very sensitive to freezing. They can be covered with tarps or blankets during a light frost. This can be especially effective if the frost is followed by more warm weather. When weather permanently turns cold, fruit should be picked, then allowed to ripen indoors. Fruits should be light green or have some hint of red in them. Tomatoes picked too green may rot. Temperatures near 70 F are ideal for faster ripening, but temperatures near 55 F will delay ripening for up to a month. Tomatoes stored below this temperature will develop a bland or off flavor. Additionally, stored tomatoes may shrivel in our low humidity before ripening. To prevent this, place a layer of fruit in a box and cover with wax paper. Another layer can be placed on top of the first and covered with more wax paper. Place the lid on the box when finished. Some choose to wrap each tomato individually. Remove tomatoes as they ripen. Placing a banana in the box and allowing it to ripen in proximity to the tomatoes may also speed ripening.

Winter squash are another vegetable commonly stored. They are ripe when the skins develop an apparent waxy coating and cannot be damaged easily by scratching the outer skin with a fingernail. However, unless you are going to immediately consume the squash, fruit should be left attached until vines mostly have been killed by frost. Leave some stem on the fruit when it is picked. Store winter squash at temperatures ranging from 50 to 60 F at relatively low humidity.

Onions should be harvested when the tops start to fall over. They should be lifted from the ground and stored in a well-ventilated area. When the necks turn brown and they “rustle when disturbed,” they are ready to be stored. Shelf life is maximized when the bulbs are stored at low humidity and near freezing. Many factors influence shelf life including variety and whether the bulbs were grown from seeds or sets. Bulbs should be checked periodically.

Potatoes are another crop commonly stored for later use. They should be harvested after the vines start to die. Cure potatoes at 50 to 60 F at relatively high humidity for two weeks. After this, store tubers near 50 F. Lower temperatures may cause an off flavor to develop. Warmer temperatures are acceptable but will decrease storage life.

Other crops such as apples, pears, cabbage, celery, carrots and parsnips can be stored for an extended period of time. The following factsheets can be accessed online, and both provide useful information. For a brief overview, Colorado State University has an excellent fact sheet. It can be accessed at: <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/Pubs/Garden/07601.html>. For a more complete look at home food storage, USU has produced a more comprehensive bulletin. It can be accessed at: http://extension.usu.edu/files/publications/publication/FN_502.pdf.