

HOME & GARDEN

Store produce in root cellars

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A root cellar is an energy and labor-efficient way of storing vegetables. All it takes is a dirt and stone basement like mine, or an insulated and separated corner of a concrete basement, or a stone lined room built into a hill, or a pit dug in the backyard or any other of dozens of places that have been designed to meet the storage needs of different vegetables. Two books that list many of the options available are *Putting Food By*, by Hertberg, Vaughn and Green and *Root Cellaring* by Mike and Nancy Bubel. "Storing Vegetables in Basements, Cellars, Outbuildings and Pits," a booklet available from the Extension Service, also gives helpful tips.

As I write this my husband is banging around down in our cellar building sturdy shelves that will shortly be laden with cartons of beets, carrots, rutabagas and potatoes. My cellar is above freezing in the winter, but with stone walls and an earth floor it is cold and damp, just the conditions needed to successfully store these root crops.

Besides have a space with the proper ventilation, temperature and humidity the only supplies you will need are sturdy shelving, wooden or plastic boxes or cartons, damp sand or sawdust, or leaves to use as packing material and a thermometer for keeping track of the temperature.

The harvest period will extend over several weeks because different vegetables have different tolerances for frost. Now on to the specific needs of different, common root vegetables.

Beets can stand some frost, but since they tend to grow with their shoulders above ground they should be picked before a heavy frost. Cut off the tops leaving a one or two inch stub. If you trim them too closely they will deteriorate more

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quickly. Never cut off the straggly tap root. Put a layer of sawdust or sand in your box and then a layer of your beets. Add enough of your moist layering material to cover the beets by an inch and then make another layer of vegetables. Keep this up until your carton is full. The temperature should be kept between 33 and 40 degrees and the humidity should be high, 90 to 95 percent. Beets stored in this way should last at least two months and with care will last four or five.

Cabbage requires the same keeping temperature and humidity as beets, but they don't require so much packing. Last year I pulled up two dozen heads of cabbage that were not quite mature. I trimmed off the large outer leaves and hung them by the roots in my cellar. I had chosen sound healthy heads and the conditions in my cellar were ideal including a good airflow from the chinks around the cellar door and windows. The cabbages kept well into March, long after our appetites for cole slaw and cabbage soup had given out. This year I am trying to be more realistic about what my family will eat over the winter months.

Carrots are as much a staple in my house as potatoes. Fortunately, they grow well in my garden and they are easy to store in the root cellar. They don't have to be rushed out of the garden, but can stay in the ground through heavy frost. Just remember to dig them up before it is impossible to get a spade in the ground. (Actually it is possible to leave carrots in the garden if you cover them with a two foot layer of mulch before the ground freezes. With this method you just go out, move the mulch and dig a few carrots as you need them). To

store carrots in the root cellar use the same method as with beets, layering them with damp sand or sawdust. If you are concerned about the humidity being high enough you can cover the carton with damp newspaper to keep the moisture in.

Potatoes can be dug up after the tops have died down and then the must be cured for one or two weeks by leaving them exposed to the air. Protect them from sun and rain during the curing period. After the skins have thickened and surface wounds have healed over they are ready to store. Potatoes will bruise easily so they should not be stored in large heavy piles; use smaller baskets that will allow some ventilation.

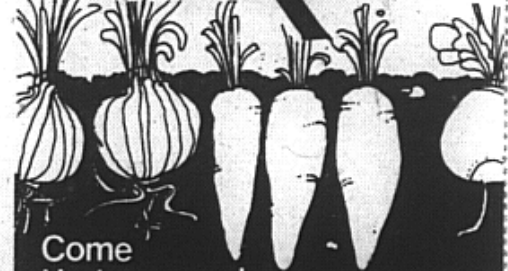
Keep potatoes in a dark spot. Light and warmth (over 45 degrees) will encourage greening and sprouting. Remember the greening is caused by toxic salanine and care should be taken to avoid this.

People are often told that potatoes and apples should be stored separately because the ethylene gas given off by the apples will cause sprouting in the potatoes. In a small home root cellar that has adequate ventilation, this should not be a major problem and many people do store them together.

Rutabagas and turnips should be brought in before a hard frost because they grow with their shoulders above the ground. Like beets and carrots, layer them with damp sand or sawdust after their tops have been cut off. They should last at least two to four months.

All of the root crops that I've mentioned today require the same storage setting — a dark place where the temperature does not go below freezing nor much over 40 degrees and where the humidity is high. Next week I'll discuss crops like onions and squash that have different requirements.

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