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STORING GARDEN-FRESH PRODUCE

It is best to consume vegetables and fruit soon after harvest. But that's not always possible. At the peak of harvest, our consumption may not be able to keep up with the production. Given the tremendous work and care we put into our food gardens, it is important to properly store our harvest.

Before storage, remove any decay. Most vegetables can be cleaned before storage, but a few should be cleaned just before consuming (for example, asparagus and potatoes). Fruits and vegetables do not play well together (remember that tomatoes are a fruit). Many fruits produce ethylene gas which causes yellowing of green veggies, russet spotting on lettuce, toughening of asparagus, sprouting of potatoes and a bitter taste in carrots. Root crops may cause off-flavors in fruits and leafy vegetables. Celery should be stored separately from onions or carrots. Sometimes a cool spot provides better storage than the refrigerator, as is the case for hard rind squashes and pumpkins, sweet potatoes, white potatoes, eggplants and okra.

Experts in Postharvest Technology at UC Davis[i] do not recommend storing vegetables and fruits in sealed plastic bags. Countertop storage may be in a vented container. Ripening fruit in a countertop bowl or paper bag can be accelerated by adding an apple (note: 'Fuji' and 'Granny Smith' do not produced as much ethylene and do not enhance ripening). Refrigerated produce may be kept in perforated plastic bags (if you're making the holes yourself, add 20 pin holes per medium bag). One Food Gardening Specialist likes to wash, spin and drain leafy vegetables and, then, put them in the covered salad spinner in her refrigerator. She also suggests inserting a slip of paper with the harvest date into a storage container or bag (this is really useful during summer's overabundance).

The *California Master Gardener Handbook*[ii] divides produce into four major groups (one group subdivided because certain vegetables should not occupy the same crisper). Each group has its own ideal temperature and humidity range.

Group 1

This group should be kept under cold, moist conditions (32 to 41 degrees F, 85 to 95 percent relative humidity). Wash and drain these veggies well before storage. Keep these in the crisper, and keep the crisper more than half full to keep humidity high.

Subgroup A vegetables that may be stored together include many leafy greens: beet greens, chard, collard greens, endive, escarole, green onions, kale, leeks, lettuce, mustard greens, spinach, turnip greens and watercress.

Subgroup B vegetables should be kept in a separate crisper from the above subgroup, or in plastic bags or containers in the main compartment of the refrigerator. This subgroup contains many Brassicas and root vegetables among others: artichokes, asparagus (do not wash first), beets, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, celery (do not store with carrots), lima beans, mushrooms, parsnips, peas, radishes, rhubarb, sweet corn (unhusked, kept close to freezer compartment) and turnips.

Group 2
This group contains many popular summer vegetables: bell peppers, chili peppers, cucumbers, ripe melons, snap beans and summer squash. It's best to store these vegetables at 45 to 55 degrees F and 85 to 90 percent relative humidity. They are sensitive to chilling injury and it is recommended that they not stay in the refrigerator for more than five days, using them soon after removing them from the refrigerator.

Group 3
This group contains eggplants, hard-rind squashes and pumpkins, okra, potatoes (protect from light to prevent greening) and sweet potatoes, and should be stored in a cool place (50 to 60 degrees F). A pantry, basement or insulated garage may provide adequate storage conditions. If you do not have such a space, store eggplants and okra like Group 2; ripe store-bought tomatoes, hard rind squashes and pumpkins and potatoes like Group 4 (but keep potatoes away from onions which may cause potatoes to sprout).

Group 4
This final group includes dry garlic, melons (unripe or partly ripe), dry onions (in open-mesh container) and tomatoes (mature green, partly ripe and ripe). Store these at room temperature (65 to 70 degrees F). Keep them away from direct sunlight.

Tomatoes may be the most popular home-grown crop. An Internet search provides varied advice about their storage. For example, a popular test kitchen suggests that storing tomatoes stem scar down may result in less rot. Alternately, the University of California states that storing tomatoes stem scar up reduces softening and darkening of fruit.[iii] In general, gardeners agree that tomatoes have the best taste if kept at room temperature and consumed within two to three days after harvest. If you decide to store them in the refrigerator for a few days, bring them to room temperature before consuming them. However, temperatures below 55 degrees F will diminish their flavor and alter their texture

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For information about harvesting, click here.

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[i] "Storing Fresh Fruits and Vegetables for Better Taste," A. Kader, *et al*, UC Davis Postharvest Technology Center, 2012.
[ii] *California Master Gardener Handbook*, 2nd Edition, Editor Dennis N. Pittenger, Publication 3382, University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources, 2015.
[iii] "Tomatoes: Safe Methods to Store, Preserve, and Enjoy," T. Parnell, *et al*, Publication 8116, UC Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, 2004.