

Storing fruit and vegetables

Contributed by Behemoth

Behemoth offers some timely advice on dealing with your harvest....

You've grown all this food and you need to store it. One way is to process it and freeze it but not everyone has the space and some crops are best stored in cool, dry conditions such as a cellar, pantry, shed, garage or if you're lucky purpose built food store. Don't put stuff in the attic as the temperature fluctuates too greatly to be a reliable store.

Potatoes

Keep potatoes in the dark, preferably in breathable sacks. Potato sacks are ideal for storing potatoes and usually come in Hessian or double walled paper sacks. You can buy the sacks from the usual suppliers or you can pop down to your local market and ask a friendly stall holder for his used sacks (it helps to buy something off him). If you know a friendly poultry keeper they often have suitable sacks to spare, as do fish and chip shops. Ideally keep them frost free between 5C and 10C. If the temperature gets any colder the starches turn to sugar and your potato can become sweet.

Root crops

In theory these can usually be left in the ground, particularly parsnips, salsify and scorzonera. Carrots, swede, kohlrabi and beetroot can be left over winter as well but they will need protection with a bit of straw and fleece.

However if you have lots of slugs, foxes extreme weather, thieves or need the space for other crops you can lift them. They are best stored in boxes of dry to just damp sand or peat. Lay down a layer of sand and place the roots in individually so they are not touching, checking they are rot and disease free. Cover with a layer of sand and repeat until finished or full. It's handy to keep an empty dustbin in the store so you can transfer the excess sand or peat to it as you work your way down your supply. Ideally the box should be stored in a cool frost free environment.

Onions, Shallots and Garlic

Harvest onions and shallots when the leaves have fallen over. Harvest garlic when the first few leaves turn yellow and fall. Lift both and lay on the ground in dry sunny weather or under shelter if the weather is wet. This cures the skin and preserves the contents. Onion sacks are best used for storing onions. Again, see your friendly stall holder at the market. If none are available orange sacks will do or you could do fancy plaits and cycle around wearing a stripy t-shirt and beret making "huh-hee-haw" noises in an attempt to be funny. Keep your onion sack in a cool dark place. Remember different types of garlic last better than others so don't forget to store them separately and label them, no I really mean label them, you won't remember which is which once the car's been to the MOT, school starts again and the boiler packs in on the first week of October.

Pumpkins and Squashes

Harvest these before the first frosts at the end of September or mid October depending where you are. Cut leaving at least 3 inches of stem or cut either side of the stem on the vine to create a "handle". However don't bring them in straight away. Leave them out in the sunshine as long as possible for the skin to harden and turn orange. Store them on a shelf or table in a cool, airy dry place that will be frost free. Remember summer varieties are best eaten fresh or stored until Christmas. Winter varieties will store much longer through the winter into spring.

Apples

Treat apples as if they are precious object even before picking. Don't yank them off the tree but scoop them gently upwards in a rolling motion and they'll yield without a fight. Gently place and store them in slatted boxes, wrapped in tissue paper if you can. Boxes or even fruit trays can be had from your friendly market stall holder (don't forget the Christmas card). Ideally store them at 2C to 5C. Do not store damaged fruit or fallen fruit. Eat those that store shortest first.

Pears

Pick them when they are hard and ideally store as apples (but not wrapped) just above freezing as the warmer they are the quicker they ripen.

Storage Management

Don't forget it's there & use your supplies inventively. Also regularly check the condition of the stores, temperature and humidity and the condition of the crops disposing of any that show signs of rot.