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Do You Have Tips For Storing Fresh Garden Vegetables?

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A weekly question/answer column

Do You Have Tips For Storing Fresh Garden Vegetables?

Bill Varga answers:*

Proper care at harvest and correct storage make it possible to enjoy your garden's bounty for weeks or even months into the winter. No single storage method is correct for all fruits and vegetables. Here are some tips for specific vegetables.

- **TOMATOES** should be picked just before the first killing frost. Pick those that are just turning slightly pink or those turning light green or slightly white. They need not be individually wrapped, but keep them in a single layer as it's easier to check for spoilage. Keep them at about 50 to 55 degrees. They will ripen at 70 degrees. They don't need to be put in sunlight to ripen and may sunburn in a window.
- **GREEN PEPPERS** that are firm, mature and the correct color can be kept for 2 to 3 weeks in perforated bags in a cool location.
- **ONIONS** should be left in the ground until there is a hard frost if the tops are still intact. If the tops fall over on their own or dry up, the onion bulb should be harvested. They can be dug and left on top of the ground to cure for a few days and then put in a shady area until the tops and scales on the outside of the bulbs are dry. The most important thing is good air circulation. Do not put onions in paper sacks or boxes. Once they are cured and dry, place them in mesh bags (or use old pantyhose) so they will continue to have good circulation. Store them in a cool, dry location.
- **POTATOES** are best left on the vine in the soil. As long as the vines are green and growing keep potatoes watered to increase your yield. Once the vines have died down you should leave the potatoes in the ground for 10-14 days to allow the skins to cure so they will scuff less when they are dug. Remove loose soil and wash the potatoes if you wish. Make sure the potatoes are thoroughly dry before storing at 35-40 degrees. When using potatoes from storage, bring them to room temperature for a week or so before using them. This will reverse the process of starches turning to sugar at the cooler temperatures.
- **PUMPKINS** and **WINTER SQUASH** should be left on the vine until the rind is hard and cannot be easily scratched. Leave an inch of stem to prevent rotting at the crown.
- **PARSNIPS**, **CARROTS** and **BEETS** can be stored right in the ground. Once the tops have frozen, mulch over the row to keep the ground from freezing so hard that you can't dig the vegetables. Label your rows so you can find what you want when snow covers the ground. If you don't store these root vegetables in the garden, dig them before the ground freezes. Remove excess soil, cut off stems, and store in a pit or storage cellar. Beets will not keep as long as carrots. Parsnips develop better flavor after several weeks in cold, moist conditions.

* Bill Varga is Utah State University Extension Horticulturist