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Cooperative Extension

## **Storing Fall Crops**

Having enjoyed a good month of peak production from the vegetable garden by now, there's been an abundance of green beans, tomatoes, and sweet corn, sometimes even a surplus. Many people know about preserving these crops with canning and freezing, and they work hard during the summer putting up jars of pickles or tomato sauce, and they stock their freezers with packages of frozen vegetables to enjoy some time later in winter.



But fall is when more later-maturing and cold-tolerant crops become prominent – late plantings of beets or carrots, hearty

greens like cabbages or kale, and winter squashes. While there are certainly ways to can or freeze some of these crops as well, there are other ways to store these crops for later use.

One of the easiest methods of storing these crops is to simply leave them in the field as long as possible. Kale and Brussels sprouts tolerate cold temperatures very well, withstanding not only hard frosts but a few freezes. Kale, in particular, will do just fine into early December until night temperatures dip into the low twenties or upper teens. With the exception of sweet potatoes, most root crops can withstand frost. If you put down an insulating blanket of straw or hay 6-8 inches thick to keep the exposed tops from freezing, carrots can survive into early December. Parsnips can be left in the ground all winter, and many claim that they are the sweetest when dug the following spring. Once you start seeing hard frosts at night, it's time to dig up your beets, turnips, rutabagas, and whatever potatoes remain. Try to do this on a dry day in order to minimize the amount of soil sticking to the roots. Trim the tops to about a half inch then move them to their winter quarters.

Root crops need to be stored in cool temperatures (32-40° F) and humid (85%) conditions. You don't necessarily need to dig a root cellar; a cool corner of the basement will work, or you can even insulate a segment of the basement or screened-in porch. Pack the vegetables (handling them gently, mind you!) in bins or boxes between layers of damp sand or sphagnum moss. Alternately, you can place the crops in plastic bags, but poke a few holes in them in order to provide some ventilation. Incidentally, these happen to be the best conditions for storing cabbages as well; select firm, mature heads and handle them gently. Under these conditions, crops can last 3-5 months.

Harvest winter squash when the stem becomes dry and "corky". In order to toughen the rinds and convert dry starches into tastier sugars, winter squashes require a period of curing. Put them in a warm, dry spot – mud rooms, porches, or even a sunny window work fine – for about 10 days. After that, store the squashes in a cool, dry (55-60° F, 50-70% relative humidity) spot. Under these conditions, squashes will keep for 2-3 months.

As mentioned previously, sweet potatoes require different handling than other root crops. They do not tolerate frosts, so it's best to dig them in late summer or early fall before any danger of even a light frost. After digging the roots, you need to cure them. Put them in a very warm  $(80-90^{\circ} \text{ F})$  and dry spot – your attic might be ideal – for about 10 days. After that, storing them in cooler  $(55-60^{\circ} \text{ F})$  but still dry conditions will allow you to store the crops for at least a month, though some have had success keeping them even longer.