



Step-by-Step: Preserving Root Crops

Introduction

Have your fall garden of root crops mature as late as possible by planting as late as possible. Cold weather sweetens the roots and you'll be putting the freshest produce into a cool root cellar, garage or back porch. Leave your last planting in the ground until the roots are fully mature; they'll store better if they're protected by a thicker skin.

For a longer storage life, dig up the roots from your fall garden after two or three days of dry weather. Your root crops will be dry, and by leaving them out for a few hours in the sun right after you pull them, you'll kill the root hairs, making the plant dormant, and the soil on the roots will dry and fall off easily.

Never wash roots before you store them. Just cut off the tops right out in the garden. Leave about an inch of stem for beets, so they don't "bleed" in cooking. For other root crops, cut the tops close. Wash the roots just before using them. Only store the best roots. Any that are damaged by insects or harvesting you can eat fresh. Injuries are avenues of rotting that can spread to the other vegetables. (Yes, one bad apple can spoil a whole bunch!) If you should bruise any, eat them right away. Also, don't ever clip off the bottom end of the root before you put it in storage; this, too, can open the plant to rot.



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Storage Space

You don't need an elaborate root cellar to store vegetables, even for months at a time. You can easily extend the fresh life of root crops using whatever storage space you currently have. The length of storage time may vary according to your storage method, but with any of the methods described below, you can be sure of at least a few extra months of fresh vegetables.

To stay crisp and fresh, root crops just need cool, moist, dark surroundings. The ideal place would be about 34° F with high humidity. Most gardeners can only approximate these conditions. But whether you have a root cellar or just a spot under the back porch for storage, the most important element for long vegetable life is an even, cold temperature.

Variations up or down of even five degrees can cause new growth to sprout (which you don't want) or rotting. Here, insulation is the key. There are many ways to give your roots the insulated low temperature they need. In-ground storage is the least expensive, most carefree root storage.

If you have an unheated basement, you can build a root cellar by partitioning off one corner, installing some insulation and a good, sound door. You're actually making a refrigeration unit.



The temperature inside the root cellar will be coolest near the floor, and that's the place for your root crops. Don't put them right on the floor -- it may be too damp. Raising them up on a few boards should do the trick.

If your cellar is cool but not insulated, a large, sturdy cardboard or wooden box with two to three inches of some insulating material (sawdust is best, and moist peat moss or sand also works well) on the bottom and sides will do fine. Place a layer of carrots on top of the sawdust, leaving two to three inches of space near the sides. Cover the carrots lightly with sawdust--1/4 inch is fine. Alternate, covering layers of carrots with sawdust, filling in all around the edges with sawdust as well. Add a final two to three inches of sawdust on top, and store this "root box" in a cool basement area. In older homes, the cellar steps leading outside make handy storage areas.

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Environment	Temp. (F)	Humidity	Crop
Cold/very moist	32-40 degrees	90-95%	Carrots, beets, celery, Chinese cabbage, kohlrabi, Brussels sprouts, rutabagas, turnips, collards, leeks, broccoli and Jerusalem artichokes
Cold and moist	32-40 degrees	80-90%	Potatoes, cabbage, cauliflower, apples, grapes, oranges, pears, endive and grapefruit
Fairly warm/dry	35-40 degrees	60-70%	Garlic, onions, beans, canned foods, grains nuts, smoked fish and meat
Fairly warm/dry	50-60 degrees	60-70%	Dry hot peppers, pumpkins, winter squash, sweet potatoes and green tomatoes

