



A harvest of several types of onions. In general, red onions and yellow onions are good keepers; white onions are not as good.

Keeper Crops

What to Grow This Summer for Healthful Meals Next Winter

By Kathy LaLiberte

Even when my garden is covered by a thick blanket of snow, my basement is still filled with food from the garden: potatoes, onions, garlic and winter squash. These easy-to-grow, easy-to-store crops keep my family well-fed all winter long. Even a modest-size garden can yield a substantial crop of winter keepers. In my own garden, I usually reserve about a third of the space for onions, garlic, potatoes and winter squash. When you plan your garden for the coming season, I encourage you to make room for one or two of these winter keepers. They're some of the easiest crops to grow and will nourish you right through to the next growing season.

Potatoes

It's fun to grow potatoes. With so many new and old varieties to choose from — fingerlings, giant bakers, yellow, red, and even blue ones — it's easy to find a couple that will thrive in your garden. If you're new to growing potatoes, don't get too concerned with picking the ideal variety. You'll probably be overjoyed with your first harvest, no matter what color or form, and can always branch out from there.

I often try a couple of new potato varieties each year, but for my main crop I just replant whatever I have left over from last year: usually some russets for baking and some buttery yellow Yukon Golds. Potatoes are well-suited to raised beds; for especially small gardens, consider the [Potato Grow Bag](#). Recently, I converted an old three-bay compost bin into a raised bed for potatoes. Read about it in the blog post [A Recycled Compost Bin](#).

My only real potato-growing challenge is the [Colorado potato beetle](#). If these beasts are a problem in your area, you'll need to pick off the beetles and destroy any larvae or eggs. At my house, picking beetles has to be done several times a week during July and August. Potato plants seem to be more resistant when they're sprayed every couple weeks with a blend of seaweed/fish emulsion. The objective is to keep them in good health with lots of foliage. The more foliage, the more good-sized tubers you'll harvest. To learn more, read [Controlling Colorado Potato Beetles](#).

When harvest time comes in early fall, dig up your potatoes and "cure" them for two weeks in a cool (50 to 60 degrees F.), dark place (or they'll turn green) with good air circulation. Once the skins have toughened a bit, nestle your spuds into bushel baskets or cardboard boxes. No



This is what seed potatoes look like.



need to rub off the dirt. Treat the tubers very gently so as not to bruise or cut them. Any damaged ones should be eaten, not stored. Cover the boxes or baskets with lots of newspaper or cardboard. Even a little light will cause the flesh to turn green and render the potatoes inedible. Ideally potatoes should be stored at 35 to 40 degrees F., though I find they keep pretty well in a cool, 50-degree basement.

Onions

Wet summers are bad for picnics but great for onions. When onions get plenty of moisture they get much larger. They also benefit from lots of sun, and will sulk if they're crowded by neighboring plants or weeds.

I start my onions from seed rather than planting the little sets of mini-onions you can buy in the spring. I've found that the onions I grow from seed store much longer — usually from September right through June. Start by selecting a seed variety that's been bred to be a good storage onion. This will produce a firm, pungent onion (the same chemicals that make onions pungent make them good keepers). There are red-colored keeping varieties as well as yellow ones. The milder white onions have a much shorter storage life.

Start your onion seeds very early — January or February — depending on where you live. Broadcast the seeds so they are about 1/2" apart and cover lightly with soil. Once the plants are up and the stems have straightened, trim the tops with scissors to a height of about 2". Repeat every couple weeks (sort of like trimming a Chia pet) until it's time for your onion plants to go into the garden. This forces energy into the roots and keeps the plants from toppling over. Onions are heavy feeders, so before planting be sure to amend your soil with compost and a [granular organic fertilizer](#). Set the seedlings (which may be no more than 1/8" in diameter at the base) about 6" apart in each direction. Keep them well-watered and well-weeded, and make sure they don't get shaded by neighboring plants.

In late summer, the tops will flop over. This sends a message to the onion that it's time to stop growing and start preparing for winter. Let the plants keep growing until the necks tighten and the foliage begins to dry. If the weather is dry and there's no danger of frost, the onions can be pulled out and laid right on top of the soil to dry. If the weather is wet or frost is possible, move your onions into a protected spot where they won't get wet. The floor of the garage or a covered porch works well. Spread the onions out in a single layer and let them "cure" for two weeks. During this time the necks will wither, and the papery skins will tighten around the bulbs. Once the necks have dried and there's no more moisture in the stem or leaves, you can bring your onions indoors and store them in mesh bags or bushel baskets. Keep them cool (35 to 45 degrees F.) and away from light. Another technique for storing an abundance of onions: make caramelized onions. For details, read the blog post [A Sweet Fix for Onions](#).

Garlic

Home-grown garlic is a valuable crop. I grow all I need for year-round use and the quality just can't be beat. There are lots of different types of garlic available now — read the seed catalogs carefully and choose one that's well-suited to your location. Here in Northern Vermont, I grow a stiff-neck variety called German white. In warmer climates, the soft-neck garlic varieties are more popular.

Garlic doesn't require much space. A 2 ft. x 12 ft. bed provides enough garlic for the average family, with plenty of extra heads to plant the next year's crop. Cold-climate gardeners plant their garlic in late fall for harvest the following August. Plant individual cloves (the bigger the clove you plant, the bigger the head you'll harvest), setting them 4" to 5" apart in all directions and just deep enough to cover the top of the clove. Water thoroughly, and then cover the whole bed with straw mulch once you've had your first hard frost. Pull off the mulch in early spring.

Garlic has the same growing requirements as onions. Keep the plants weeded and well-watered, and give them lots of sun. Calculating the correct harvest time is a little trickier. Dig the plants when the second set of leaves begins to yellow. In Vermont, this is usually sometime in mid-August. If you wait too long, the cloves will separate and they won't store as



Onions should be cured before they are stored.



A perfect bulb, just after harvest.



Store your garlic in a dry, dark place just like you would onions. Sort out and save a dozen of the biggest heads for planting next fall (it's hard to do, but worth it!). By planting only the biggest cloves, you'll gradually get bigger and bigger heads each year and will never need to buy garlic again.

Winter Squash

Acorn, hubbard, buttercup, spaghetti, delicata and golden nugget. Winter squash are truly beautiful and lots of fun to grow. Six or eight butternut squash is plenty to get me through the winter. But if you're a real squash lover, you'll probably want twice that amount.

Squash plants take up a lot of space, but they're not fussy about where they grow. I banish mine to a spot behind the barn where they can sprawl as much as they want. You can usually plan on harvesting one or two good-sized squash from each plant. The usual recommendation is to put two to three plants (or seeds) in a little group, and space these "hills" about three-feet apart.

Don't plant your squash until the soil has warmed and all danger of frost has passed. Young squash plants appreciate protection from insects and harsh weather. I cover mine with [garden fabric \(row cover\)](#). Fertilize a couple times early in the growing season and then forget the plants until the first light frost, when the leaves will die and reveal your harvest.

After harvesting, let your squash cure in the sun for 10 days or so. Be sure to cover them well if you expect more than a light frost. Store them where it's cool, but they won't mind temperatures of 50 to 60 degrees F. Eat acorn, spaghetti and delicata squash first. They won't keep well past the holidays.



Squash can be grown in raised beds, but they should be allowed to ramble outside the boundaries of the bed. Another option is to train the vines on sturdy trellises.



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