

# **Foods You Can Grow and Store All Winter – The Lowdown on Storage Crops**

Eating local is something many of us strive for, but it can be easier said than done. We are at the mercy of the growing season for whatever local fresh produce is available and at the mercy of our work schedules for the time to track it down.

Farmers markets and local farm stands are a great place to find in-season fruits and veggies during a good part of the year, but busy schedules and weekend obligations can make regular market shopping difficult. The reality for many of us is that quick trips to the grocery store on the way home are what we can manage.

Some stores will carry local produce when they can, but most of the year it is imported from other regions. Additionally, prices are often higher for local because small farmers can't offer stores the same wholesale margin as giant corporate farms. Those of us who garden can only enjoy meals from dirt to plate for so many months before the growing season ends.

Still, we know how important it is. We know that buying from local farms strengthens our local economy. We know we reduce our impact by supporting sustainable agricultural practices and reducing the distance our food travels to reach us. This is why we need to know more about storage crops.

## **Storage Crops to the Rescue!**

Storage crops are foods that will last most of the year under the right conditions and include foods like potatoes, onions, shallots, garlic, root vegetables, winter squash, and pumpkins. The right conditions may seem daunting and

mysterious, as root cellars have become something in our grandmother's stories of the past, but just because you don't have a root cellar doesn't mean you can't keep storage crops through most of the winter.

I have used my garage, pantry, attic, and closet to store local staples and had great success. Sure, some things only make it to April, but there's enough produce growing again by that time that it really doesn't matter. You can make the most of a single trip to the farmers' market or a local farm stand in the fall and stock up a store of these crops at excellent prices. It takes a little planning, but there are many creative ways to keep your food supply local year round.

## Potatoes

People have been raising families on potatoes for centuries. They're versatile, they're nutritious, and they'll keep for months. They are easy to grow and don't require a lot of garden space. There are even creative options like vertical potato cages that allow you to keep layering as the foliage climbs upward. If you don't have room for gardening, or have a larger family than you can grow enough potatoes for, many farmers offer them at discount bulk prices as a storage crop. The important basics are storing them in a cool, dark, well-ventilated place; 50 to 60 degrees is your target temperature. Cellars and basements are ideal, but covered boxes in the garage, or bins in the bottom of your kitchen cabinets will keep them for quite a while. You can make a lot of different local meals centered around potatoes in the middle of the winter, which makes them a storage crop staple. Depending on the variety of potato, storage conditions, and outside temperatures, potatoes will keep up to 6 months.

# Onions

Let's face it. Almost every recipe calls for onions, so stocking up on your own local supply of this vegetable is going to take you a long ways towards a more local year-round diet. Much like potatoes, farmers will offer discounted prices on bulk quantities in the fall, so calculate how many onions you think you might use per week and do the math to find out how many pounds you need. Onions need cool, dark, well-ventilated storage conditions, but unlike potatoes they need to stay a little more dry. I like to store my onions in baskets, mesh bags, or hanging braids in my attic. Garages are also a fine place, but cellars and basements can lead to spoilage. Under the right conditions, onions will keep up to 6 months.

# Garlic

Garlic is one of those foods that doubles as a medicine and overall health booster, so I try to put it in as many dishes as I can. Garlic is easy to grow and doesn't require a lot of garden space, and I have managed to grow my entire garlic supply for the year for quite a while now.

This year I planned ahead and grew extra to plant as the following year's garlic seed so I wouldn't have to buy it. Garlic can be grown, cured, and braided for hanging storage, or it can be purchased from a farmer in bulk. You want to store it pretty much the same way as onions. Because it can be stored hanging in long braids, it doesn't take up much room and adds a festive look to your storage area. You can easily get away with never buying garlic from the grocery store again. You can easily get away with never buying garlic from the grocery store again. Under the right conditions, hardneck garlic varieties will keep up to 10 months and softneck garlic varieties will keep up to a year.

# Winter Squash and Pumpkins

I heard something in the news recently about the expected canned pumpkin shortage for the coming year because of this past spring's wacky weather in the Midwest, so now is a better than ever time to start buying and storing local pumpkins and winter squash. This is a fun crop to stock up on, because it can involve an October trip to the pumpkin patch. Usually farms with a u-pick pumpkin field will also offer a variety of squash in their farm stand. As long as there is a stem left on them and they are kept below 60 degrees, with low humidity, squash can keep until the following summer in your garage, attic, closet, or sometimes just sitting out on your kitchen counter. They are more prone to spoilage than the other storage crops, so it is important to sort them regularly and eat the ones that don't look like they'll make it. The great bonus thing about having a lot of storage squash is that every time you cook one, you can roast the seeds as a healthy snack. Depending on the variety, storage conditions, and outside temperatures, pumpkins and winter squash will keep up to 8 months.

## Storage Crops are Winter Staples

Once you get in the habit of planning winter meals around the storage crops you have on hand, you will find yourself with a delicious, nutritious, local and seasonal diet. Potatoes provide plenty of potassium, iron, B6, and fiber. Onions are high in Vitamin C, B6, essential minerals, and fiber. Garlic is rich in calcium, magnesium, iron, potassium, zinc, selenium, antioxidants, and Vitamin C; and also provides anti-microbial and anti-bacterial properties. Winter squash and pumpkins are a straight up superfood, offering high levels of beta-carotene, Vitamin C, Vitamin D, antioxidants, polysaccharides, and fiber. Let's also not forget the seeds, offering a powerhouse of nutrients in a tiny, crunchy package.

There are even a few other veggies that will keep as storage crops with a little ingenuity. Root vegetables like carrots, parsnips, turnips, and beets will keep for months in the refrigerator or a bucket of moist sand. Apples can keep for months if stored in a cool place and sorted regularly for rot.

Remember that the lack of a root cellar is not holding you back. There are a lot of storage options that mostly fit the criteria and will give you months of local meals. Now that you know the low-down on storage crops, it's the perfect time of year to get out there and stock up. You will thank yourself for it in January.

### **Recommended Reading:**

- *How to Make a Tincture*
- *Total Nutrition – Make your own Homemade Multivitamin and Mineral Formula*
- *Homemade Calcium and Magnesium*
- *Homemade Vitamin C*

### **Sources:**

- *Keeper Crops – Gardeners.com*
- *Build a Root Cellar in Your Home – Rodales Organic Life*
- *Potato Goodness Unearthed – Potato Goodness.com*
- *Options for Storing Potatoes at Home – University of Idaho Extension*
- *National Onion Association – Onions USA*
- *Garlic Nutrition and Facts – Nutrition and You*
- *Storing Pumpkins & Winter Squash – All About Pumpkins*
- *Enjoy the Taste and Health Benefits of Winter Squash – Michigan State University Extension*
- *National Farmers' Market Directory*