

Get organised!

You don't want to suddenly find yourself with lots of rotting vegetables and fruit, so it's a good idea to plan what you're going to do with your harvest.

Drying, freezing and preserving with salt, sugar and/or vinegar are all good ways to increase the shelf life of many types of fruit and vegetables, and, if stored well, others will last a decent amount of time.

Choose the method that is most suited to your needs and you can enjoy your garden produce through the winter and spring months too. See our charts below for the best methods for preserving fruit, vegetables and herbs.

Although it seems a bit of a pity at the height of the harvest to freeze your surplus, it's worth considering, provided you have the freezer storage space. Jams, jellies and chutneys, as old-fashioned as they sound, are enjoyable to make if you have the time.

For something a bit different, you can turn a traditional strawberry jam into something special with the addition of chilli or a splash of balsamic vinegar. Spice up pickled onions with Thai spices, or combine different fruits to make an interesting jelly. You could also try oven-drying - a fantastic way of making the most of too many tomatoes, chillies, aubergines and even apples or pears.

It's also important to be careful and take note of the safety advice for each method - if you don't follow the guidelines; there is the possibility of food poisoning.

Storing

Some fruits and vegetables can store well without being preserved as long as they are kept in the right conditions. Apples and pears store well for months if you choose unblemished fruit. Wrap each one in dry newspaper and then place in a single layer in the bottom of a wooden crate or shallow cardboard box. Place in a dry, airy place.

Root vegetables such as potatoes or beetroot also store well. For beetroot, cut off the leafy tops and then place to dry in a single layer in a wooden or cardboard box. Potatoes can be stored in hessian or paper sacks; just remove any moist mud from them to prevent mould forming. Store in a cool, airy, dark place, such as a larder or a shed.

Onions, garlic and shallots can also be stored. Plait the leafy tops and then hang them up to dry in a shed, larder or another airy, dry place.

Oven-drying

Oven-drying is a good method of preserving some types of fruit and vegetables including tomatoes, peppers and apples. They can then be added to salads, soups or casseroles to lend flavour, colour or texture. Be aware that fruits and vegetables dried commercially are often treated with chemicals to help the food keep its colour, so don't be disappointed if your home efforts lose some colour.

A very low oven (130C/250F/Gas ½) or the bottom, cool oven of an Aga is ideal.

- Slice the washed and prepared fruit or vegetable very finely using a serrated-edged knife.
- Arrange in a single layer on a large baking tray and leave in the oven for several hours or until totally dry and verging on crisp.
- Cool and store in an airtight container and use within a few weeks.

Freezing

Freezing doesn't preserve food indefinitely, but frozen fruit and vegetables will keep for up to six months. Inevitably some deterioration will occur, but with correct care it can be kept to a minimum. It is easy to over-stuff the freezer and then not use all your produce, so always label the food.

Golden rules for freezing

- Only freeze small quantities at any one time - this ensures rapid freezing that results in small, rather than large, crystals forming and minimises damage to the structure of the food.
- Divide foods to be frozen into usable amounts.

- Always wrap food carefully - the intense cold air of the freezer has a drying effect on the food.
- Long-term, direct contact with cold air in a freezer will cause freezer burn. Choose plastic boxes with tight-fitting lids or use heavy-duty freezer bags to store the food.
- Always label food carefully - you can keep an eye on your own 'use by' dates and this will prevent waste in the long term.
- Always defrost food thoroughly and avoid re-freezing.
- Defrost food in the refrigerator, not at room temperature or submerged in water - this prevents loss of moisture.

Methods of freezing

Method 1: Fruit and vegetables - open freezing

This method stops fruit or vegetables freezing into a solid block. It also minimises structural damage.

- Arrange the prepared fruit or vegetable on a large tray and freeze for a few hours until solid.
- Transfer to a freezer bag - extract as much air as you can using a straw.
- Tie securely and label.

Method 2: Fruit only - sugar packed

If you are planning to use the fruit for puddings or jam you can toss the prepared fruit in a little sugar, transfer to a heavy-duty bag, extract the air, tie securely and freeze. The sugar will absorb juice that runs from the fruit and will become syrupy on defrosting.

Method 3: Fruits and some vegetables - purée (cooking to a pulp)

Stew fruits such as apples, pears or plums, mash lightly, then leave to cool completely. Freeze in plastic tubs or heavy-duty bags. These fruits can then be used for sauces, puddings and jams. This method is also good for cooking orchard fruits such as quinces. Once defrosted they can be dripped through a muslin bag and the juice used for making jelly.

Method 4: Vegetables - blanching

Frozen vegetables are great for cooked dishes, but not for eating as raw. The vegetable needs to be prepared as if you were going to eat it straight away so French beans, broad beans, peas and broccoli are ideal for this method. Blanch quickly for 1-2 minutes in boiling salted water - this stops enzyme activity - but take care not to overcook. Refresh for a few seconds under running cold water, then leave to go completely cold. Bag, seal and label as above.