

# IN THE DIRT

## Backyard Farmer

<http://byf.unl.edu/>

Airs live Thursdays at 7:00 p.m.

Repeats Sundays at noon & Tuesdays at 11 p.m. on NET1.

## September Garden Activities

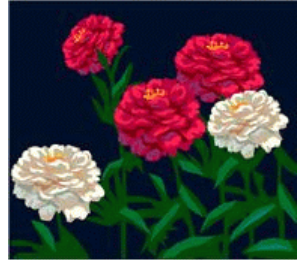


- Protect honeybees. Use caution when applying insecticides to flowering plants.

- Plant or divide peonies now. Bury the crowns only 1 to 1 ½ inches below the soil. Planting them deeper than 2 inches can result in poor blooming.

The tops can be cut back after September 1 or

wait until after the first frost if the foliage is green and healthy. Old peony clumps which are blooming well should not be dug and divided unless there is a good reason to do so. It generally takes three years after dividing and replanting for a peony to return to desirable size and flower display. When dividing, lift and divide the roots after the plants go dormant (September 1). Before lifting, cut the leaves and stems off to the ground. Carefully dig around and under the plant, taking care not to break off the roots or eyes. Wash off soil. Use a sharp, sterilized knife to cut the roots into divisions containing three to five strong buds and a generous portion of fleshy root. Shorten roots to four to six-inch stubs and remove the smaller, threadlike roots. Be sure to replant at the correct depth (the buds, eyes, should be no deeper than one to two inches) or peonies may fail to bloom in the future.



- Bring in cuttings of geraniums, herbs, or other perennials.

- Dig summer flowering bulbs, cure and store in an appropriate place. Plant spring blooming bulbs. An inexpensive colorful golf tee is a great way to mark dormant bulb plants.

- September is the time to ensure a good harvest from your strawberry planting next year. Strawberry flower buds begin to form in late summer, making this an important time of year to maintain good moisture levels in your strawberry bed. Plants generally required 1½ - 2 inches or more of water each week depending on soil type and weather conditions. Apply enough water to wet the soil to a depth of 6-8 inches.



- Plant balled and burlap or container stock of adapted trees.

- Bring in house plants before night temperatures drop below 50 degrees F. Inspect plants for insects. Bring in amaryllis and allow to go dormant.

- Pickup and destroy windfall apples to reduce numbers of overwintering insects.

- Properly cure onions and gladiolus for winter storage. Discard diseased onions or bulbs.

- Termites and carpenter ants cause extensive structural damage to homes. Check for the presence of these pests at least once a year.



## Can Tomatoes Be Frozen Raw?



Like peppers, tomatoes can be frozen raw. Frozen tomatoes are best used in cooked foods such as soups, sauces and stews as they become mushy when they're thawed. The National Center for Home Food Preservation offers these guidelines for freezing tomatoes:

Select firm, ripe tomatoes with deep red color. Wash and dip in boiling water for 30 seconds to loosen skins. Core and peel. Freeze whole or in pieces. Pack into containers, leaving 1 inch headspace. Seal and freeze. Use only for cooking or seasoning as tomatoes will not be solid when thawed.

**TIP:** Dip just a few tomatoes at a time into the boiling water or the water temperature may be lowered too much to remove the skins without overheating the tomatoes. Place hot tomatoes in a colander and rinse under cold water to make them easier to handle. A knife with a serrated edge works best for cutting tomatoes.



Source: Alice Henneman, UNL Extension Educator

## Harvesting and Storing Garden Vegetables

By Sarah Browning, UNL Extension Educator

Many gardeners grow extra vegetables and fruits for winter storage, but how can you make your produce store for the longest time possible? First, remember that good produce storage quality begins at harvest.

### Harvest Tips

Avoid physical damage during harvest. Most fruits and vegetables are easily bruised if not handled carefully. When harvesting, treat produce as if it were fine china. Tossing fruits and vegetables into baskets or boxes may not leave visible bruises and damage, but decay will begin under the skin. Seemingly sturdy vegetables such as sweet potatoes are actually quite delicate and will not store well if bruised. Any damaged produce should be used as quickly as possible and not placed in winter storage.



Root crops such as beets, carrots, rutabagas, parsnips and turnips can be left in the garden into late fall and early winter. A heavy mulch of straw will help prevent the ground from freezing so the roots can be dug when needed. The mulch will also maintain the quality of the roots, as it will reduce repeated freezing and thawing. Many people prefer the taste of these root crops after they have been frosted because their flavors become sweeter and milder.

When temperatures drop low enough to freeze the ground under the mulch, finish harvesting the roots. Cut off all but one-half inch of the top and store at 32 to 40° Fahrenheit in high humidity to reduce shriveling.

### Cleaning Produce

Not all produce should be washed after harvest, including onions, garlic, Irish potatoes and sweet potatoes.

Some produce, however, should be washed and dried before storing, including winter squash and pumpkins, along with green and red tomatoes. Commercial packinghouses use sanitizers in packing line water to kill the fungi, bacteria and yeast that might otherwise cause spoilage. Sodium hypochlorite (liquid laundry bleach, 5.25% concentration) is the most readily available of these sanitizers for home gardeners.

Cool produce before washing, then use water a few degrees warmer than the fruits and vegetables to mix up your solution. This prevents cold wash water from being pulled inside the fruits along with any pathogens in the wash water. Dip produce in a solution of 1½ teaspoons of liquid bleach added to each gallon of warm wash water. Do not allow produce to sit in water; a quick dip is sufficient to remove pathogens.





## Curing

Several vegetables benefit from post-harvest curing. Curing heals or suberizes injuries from harvesting operations. It thickens the skin, reducing moisture loss and affording better protection against insect and microbial invasion. Curing is usually accomplished at an elevated storage temperature and high humidity.

Produce can be cured in home storage areas. Temperature & humidity should be managed as accurately as possible. A space heater in an enclosed area can provide the needed heat for curing. Humidity can be increased by overlaying containers with sheets of plastic.

## Storing Garden Produce

Proper long-term storage of homegrown vegetables and fruits depends primarily on two factors: air temperature in the storage area and humidity levels. Different vegetables or fruits have different storage requirements, although three main storage regimens predominate, including:

**Cool and dry storage** consists of 50-60° F temperatures and 60% relative humidity. In the home, basements are generally cool and dry making this the easiest storage regimen to achieve. However, in the winter with a furnace and dehumidifier running, the humidity may drop below optimum. If storing vegetables in basements, provide them with some ventilation. Harvested vegetables still "breathe" and require oxygen to maintain high quality. Also, be sure they are protected from rodents. Cool, dry storage is ideal for winter squash and pumpkins.



**Cold and dry storage** is 32-40° F temperatures and 65% relative humidity. For cold storage items 32° F is ideal, but is difficult to achieve in the home. For every degree above 32° F, expect a shorter storage life of your produce, as much as 25% for every 10° F increase in temperature. Refrigerator conditions are generally cold and dry, so an extra refrigerator is fine for long term storage of garlic and onions.

**Cold and moist storage** consists of 32-40° F temperatures and 95% humidity. Root cellars provide cold and moist conditions, or try refrigerator storage with the produce in perforated plastic bags. Produce can be placed in perforated plastic bags to increase humidity, however, unperforated plastic bags may result in water condensation inside the bag that leads to the growth of mold and bacteria. Make sure the produce has adequate ventilation or air movement, and if using a root cellar, protect it from rodents. Clean straw, hay and wood shavings may be used for insulation. Cold and moist conditions are best for the storage of beets, cauliflower, cabbage, broccoli, brussels sprouts, carrots, kohlrabi, parsnips, radishes, rutabagas & turnips.

Apples and pears also store best under cold (30-32° F) and moist (90% humidity) conditions, however, it is best to store apples separately because they give off ethylene gas which speeds the ripening of other produce.



For specific information on the ideal conditions for many common fruits and vegetables or specific guidelines on curing garden produce, refer to NebGuide 1264 Storing Fresh Fruits & Vegetables <http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/epublic/live/g1264/build/g1264.pdf>.

## Preparing Onions for Winter Storage

One specific example of storage of a vegetable is onions. These can be harvested when the tops have fallen over and begun to dry. Do not bend over the tops during the growing season to force the energy into the bulb. This practice reduces the growth of the onions as they will not be able to translocate sugars to the bulb for storage.



Home gardeners should cure onions after harvest by spreading them in a single layer on screens in the shade or in a well-ventilated garage or shed for one to two weeks or until the tops are completely dry and shriveled. If the bulbs are exposed to full sun, prevent sunscald by allowing their foliage to cover them or by covering them with a light-weight cloth. When the tops are dry, they should be trimmed to one-inch lengths. Leave the onions dry outer skins on; they help reduce bruising and shrinking and act as an insect barrier.

Store onions in shallow boxes, mesh bags or hang them in old nylons in a cold, dry well-ventilated room. Temperatures close to 32° F will give the longest storage. Products prone to absorb odors or flavors should not be stored close to onions.