

Food Storage 101

Proper food storage is a necessary component of healthful cooking, but often feels confusing. Fortunately, apps are available either online or for download onto a handheld device, such as the USDA FoodKeeper app (<https://www.foodsafety.gov/keep-food-safe/foodkeeper-app>). A quick search online can also help you find information on what foods are in-season, how to select fresh foods, and how to store any foods you're interested in.

The following are some general recommendations that serve as good rules of thumb. However, these should not be taken as comprehensive information on food selection and storage.



Fresh Fruit

Buy in-season for the best flavor. Once ripe, most fruit should be stored in the refrigerator until ready to eat for the longest shelf life. Bananas are an exception to this—they should not be refrigerated. However, fruit is more likely to be consumed sitting out in a dish, so you may want to place a few items on the counter (no more than 1–2 days' worth) to encourage eating.

- Make sure not to refrigerate unripe or underripe fruits, such as stone fruits (e.g., peaches, nectarines, plums, avocados, figs, plantains, etc.), because they will not ripen in the refrigerator. Keep these on the counter until ripe and then refrigerate if they haven't been eaten.
- Don't wash fruit until you're ready to eat it. The additional moisture promotes rotting. This is especially true for berries.
- Store unwashed berries in glass jars with lids to prolong freshness.

Vegetables

What many consider vegetables from a cooking standpoint actually include many items that are botanically fruits. True vegetables range from delicate, leafy greens to sturdy root vegetables. Therefore, storage methods and durations range considerably from one item to the next.



Greens and herbs: Follow the link at the bottom of this handout to find the "How to Wash and Store Fresh Greens and Herbs" handout or the "Knife Skills: Lettuce & Other Leafy Greens" video in Session 4: Soups & Salads.



Vegetables (continued)

- Tomatoes and related items: These should not be refrigerated until ripe, and if possible, refrigeration should be avoided altogether except for cut tomatoes or prepared dishes. Tomatoes are best eaten fresh but are also delicious after canning or freezing in prepared sauces.
- Root vegetables (e.g., potatoes, turnips, beets, rutabagas, carrots, parsnips, etc.): It's best to look up the individual vegetable in question as storage times and methods vary widely.
 - *For example, potatoes actually last longest when stored between 45–55° Fahrenheit, and spoil more quickly at higher or lower temperatures (such as room or refrigerator temperatures).*
 - *Rutabagas and turnips, on the other hand, can last months in the crisper drawer of the refrigerator.*
 - *Carrots and parsnips do well stored in plastic bags in the crisper drawer for weeks.*
 - *Beets are a bit more temperamental and will only last a little more than a week in the fridge.*
 - *Greens sold with root vegetables must be removed from roots for storage (though most can be used in other cooking methods, so don't waste them!) and each root vegetables' storage life can be prolonged using other tips and tricks available by searching online.*
- Allium (e.g., onions, garlic, and similar vegetables): Again, looking up each individual type is the best way to go.
 - *Depending on the type and time of harvest, allium can have different shelf lives. Those harvested in the fall store the longest, particularly kept separated in breathable bags (NOT plastic) in a dry location at about 40–45° Fahrenheit. To store in the fridge, place in the driest location (if drawers are adjustable, set for the low-moisture setting) and use within 2 weeks.*
 - *Green onions or scallions should be kept refrigerated in a bag, wrapped in a lightly damp cloth for about 1 week. Peeled, cut onions can be stored for up to 2 weeks in the refrigerator in a plastic bag or sealable container. Cut or chopped onions can also be frozen for up to 6 months, but these should only be used for cooking and not eaten raw, because they will be somewhat mushy when thawed.*

- Peppers: Store these in the crisper drawer or in a plastic bag. Too much moisture will cause them to rot, and too little will cause them to get soft and wrinkled. Large peppers, such as bell peppers, keep 1 week in the fridge; smaller peppers, such as spicy chilies, can keep slightly longer.
- Eggplant and summer squashes: Store these dry and unwashed, in a plastic or paper bag, open on one end, in the crisper drawer of the refrigerator; they keep 1–2 weeks.
- Winter squashes: These can be cellared for months between 50–55° Fahrenheit. For most home cooks, these keep a month or more uncovered, on a counter, with good air circulation, out of direct sunlight.

Nuts and Seeds

Store nuts and seeds in air-tight containers in a cool, dark place at room temperature for 2–4 months. For longer storage, refrigerate for up to 6 months or freeze for a year or more. Similar to oils, described below, the fats in nuts go rancid and develop an unpleasant taste as they spoil.



Whole Grains

Light, heat, and moisture are the enemies of storing most foods, and whole grains are no exception. Whole grains last longer than flour. Store in air-tight containers.

- Whole grains: Keep for up to 6 months in the pantry on a cool, dry shelf or up to a year in the freezer.
- Whole grain flours: Keep for 1–3 months in the pantry on a cool, dry shelf or 6–12 months in the freezer.

Dry Beans

Store in an air-tight container, such as a glass jar with tight-fitting lid. They will keep for years in the pantry. The older dry beans get, the longer they take to cook, so adjust cooking times accordingly.



Oils

Unlike good wine, oils do not get better with age. Oils should be stored in a cool, dark place out of direct sunlight and away from warm appliances. Storing in dark colored bottles can help prolong storage life. When oil spoils, or turns rancid, it can have a metallic, bitter, or soapy odor and taste like crayons, motor oil, or the bitterness of old nuts. The mouthfeel gets greasy, and later sticky, as it gets progressively more rancid.

- Refined oils: This group includes those that are translucent without particulate matter; they can keep 6–12 months. When stored properly, the “use by” date is a good indicator of how long an oil will last.
- Unrefined oils: These include extra-virgin olive oil and other cold-pressed or expeller-pressed oils and can keep for 3–6 months once opened. The “use by” date typically refers to how long unopened bottles of unrefined oils will last.



Dry Herbs

Store in air-tight containers, out of direct sunlight, in a cool place for 6–12 months. If kept dry, most herbs don’t spoil, but rather the flavor fades away. If using older herbs in cooking, use more than the recipe calls for.

Dry Spices

Store in air-tight containers, out of direct sunlight. Whole, dried spices can last 3–4 years, while ground spices last 1–2 years. Like herbs, most spices don’t spoil, but rather the flavor fades away. If using spices on the older ends of these time ranges, use more than the recipe calls for.

