

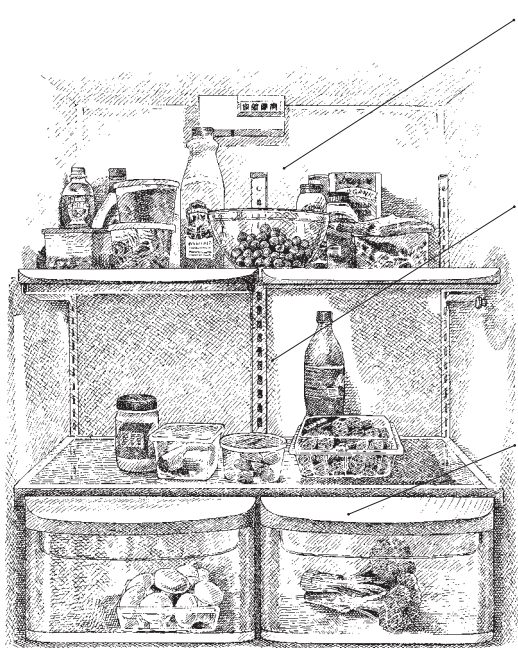
How to Keep Produce Fresher Longer

Proper storage is the key to longer-lasting fruits and vegetables. BY KEITH DRESSER

Most people tend to treat all fruits and vegetables the same, fitting them wherever there's room in the fridge. The reality is, different types of produce have different storage requirements. Some need to be placed in the coldest part of the refrigerator, some need humidity, and some don't need to be chilled at all. Storing your produce under the appropriate conditions is the key to prolonging its shelf life.

REFRIGERATOR MICROCLIMATES

We often think of our refrigerator as having a single temperature: around 34 degrees Fahrenheit, the average temperature recommended for a home refrigerator. In fact, every refrigerator has its own microclimates, with warmer, cooler, and more humid zones. When we hooked up a special device to one of our refrigerators in the test kitchen to monitor temperatures in various locations, we found that temperature ranged from as low as 33 degrees to as high as 43. You can make this temperature variation work to your advantage by learning which fruits and veggies do best where.



COLD ZONE: BACK, TOP TO MIDDLE

The top and middle shelves at the back of the fridge are normally the coldest, with temperatures that can dip below 34 degrees. Fruits and vegetables that are not prone to chill-injury should be stored here.

MODERATE ZONE: FRONT, MIDDLE TO BOTTOM

The areas at the front of our refrigerator, from the middle to the bottom shelves, were the most moderate, with temperatures above 37 degrees. Put fruits and vegetables that need refrigeration but are sensitive to chill-injury here.

HUMID ZONE: CRISPER DRAWER

Crispers provide a humid environment that helps keep produce with a high water content from shriveling and rotting. However, if the humidity is too high, water can build up on fruits and vegetables and hasten spoilage. You can regulate humidity by adjusting the vents; the more cold air that is let in, the less humid the environment.

STORAGE BASICS

Ethylene: Enemy of Freshness

As produce ripens, it emits small amounts of the ripening hormone ethylene. If ethylene is allowed to build up (in the closed environment of a plastic bag, for example, or a crisper), the gas will activate enzymes that break down and soften the cell walls of produce, speeding moisture loss and spoilage. Most storage techniques are designed to slow the production of ethylene or mitigate its impact.

When to Wash

With the exception of berries (see "Better Berry Treatment," page 17), it's best to wash produce just before you use it. Moisture promotes the growth of mold, which in turn causes spoilage. If you do wash ahead of time, make sure to dry the produce thoroughly before storing.

It's a Wrap

In general, it's a good idea to store produce in the packaging in which it was sold. Sometimes ready-made packaging has a function beyond simple convenience and can actually help to preserve the contents. For example, though they appear solid, the bags in which spinach and other greens are now sold are made of a polymer that allows ripening gases to pass through freely (see "Ethylene: Enemy of Freshness," left), staving off spoilage. Other types of packaging often feature small perforations or other openings (such as the bags in which celery is sold); here, too, the intent is to allow gases to escape while also protecting the produce from the drying effects of air.

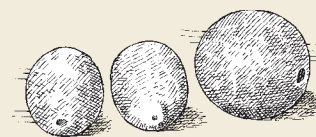


WHERE TO STORE PRODUCE

➤ Keep in the Front of the Fridge

These items are sensitive to chill-injury and should be placed in the front of the fridge, where the temperatures tend to be higher.

- Berries
- Citrus
- Corn on the cob
- Melons
- Peas



➤ Best in the Crisper

These items do best in the humid environment of the crisper.

- | | | |
|-------------|--------------|---------------|
| Artichokes | Chiles | Mushrooms |
| Asparagus | Cucumbers | Peppers |
| Beets | Eggplant | Radishes |
| Broccoli | Fresh herbs | Scallions |
| Cabbage | Green beans | Summer squash |
| Carrots | Leafy greens | Turnips |
| Cauliflower | Leeks | Zucchini |
| Celery | Lettuce | |

➤ Chill Anywhere

These items are not prone to chill-injury and can be stored anywhere in the fridge (including its coldest zones), provided the temperature doesn't freeze them.

- Apples
- Cherries
- Grapes



➤ On the Counter

Some produce is sensitive to chill-injury and is subject to dehydration, internal browning, and/or internal and external pitting if stored in the refrigerator.

- | | |
|------------|-----------|
| Apricots | Papayas |
| Avocados* | Peaches |
| Bananas | Pears |
| Kiwis* | Pineapple |
| Mangos | Plums |
| Nectarines | Tomatoes |



*Once they've reached their peak ripeness, these fruits can be stored in the refrigerator to prevent overripening, but some discoloration may occur.

➤ In the Pantry

The following produce should be kept at cool room temperature and away from light to prevent sprouting (in the case of potatoes) and to prolong shelf life.

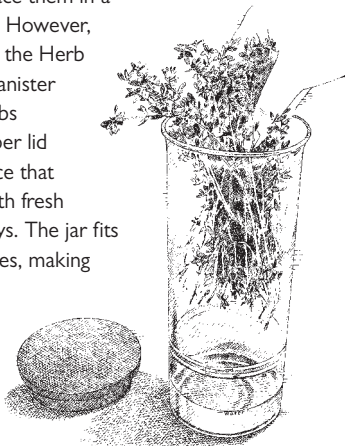
- | | |
|----------|----------------|
| Garlic | Shallots |
| Onions | Sweet potatoes |
| Potatoes | Winter squash |



STORAGE TECHNIQUES

Herb Keeper

Because stores sell fresh herbs in larger bundles than called for in most recipes, we are always interested in finding new ways to maximize the shelf life of leftovers. In the test kitchen, our preferred method for storing herbs has been to wrap them in a damp paper towel, then place them in a plastic bag in the refrigerator. However, that changed when we found the Herb Keeper (\$12.99), an acrylic canister that holds long-stemmed herbs upright in water. It has a rubber lid and a removable bottom piece that can be unscrewed to refill with fresh water every three to four days. The jar fits inside refrigerator door shelves, making it easy to store. Compared with our standard storage method, we found that the Herb Keeper added three to four days to an herb's life.

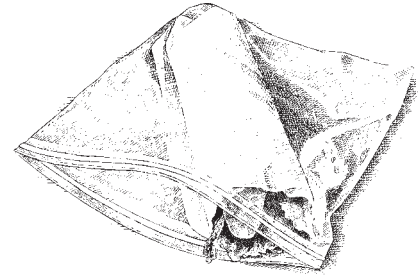


Keeping Lettuce Crisp

When lettuce and other leafy greens come in bags, store them in their original packaging (see "It's a Wrap," page 16). Store lettuce without packaging as follows.



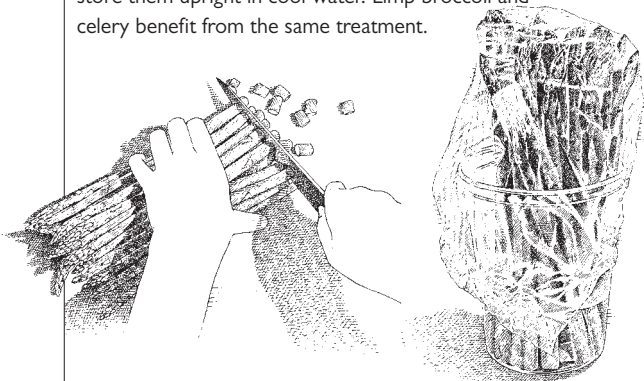
1. SHORT-TERM STORAGE Wash and dry lettuce, then line the empty salad spinner with paper towels. Layer in the lettuce, covering each layer with additional paper towels.



2. LONGER-TERM STORAGE Loosely roll the washed and dried lettuce in a kitchen towel or paper towels and then place inside a large zipper-lock bag; leave the bag open to allow gases to escape. Lettuce will keep for up to one week.

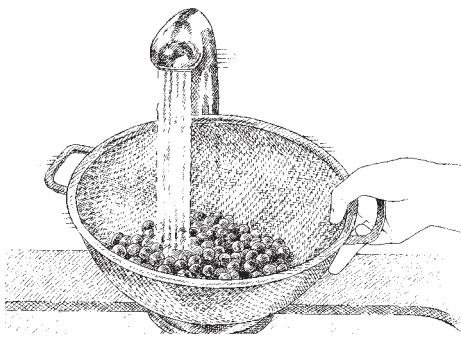
Water Your Spears

Asparagus stored in the fridge can quickly dry out and become tough. To keep spears tender and flavorful, trim the ends and store them upright in cool water. Limp broccoli and celery benefit from the same treatment.

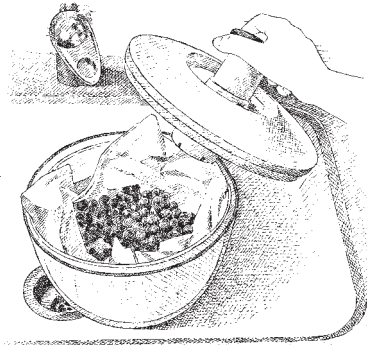


Better Berry Treatment

While damp berries turn mushy faster than dry berries, we've discovered that cleaning with a mild vinegar solution and carefully drying destroys bacteria and mold spores, extending a berry's life.



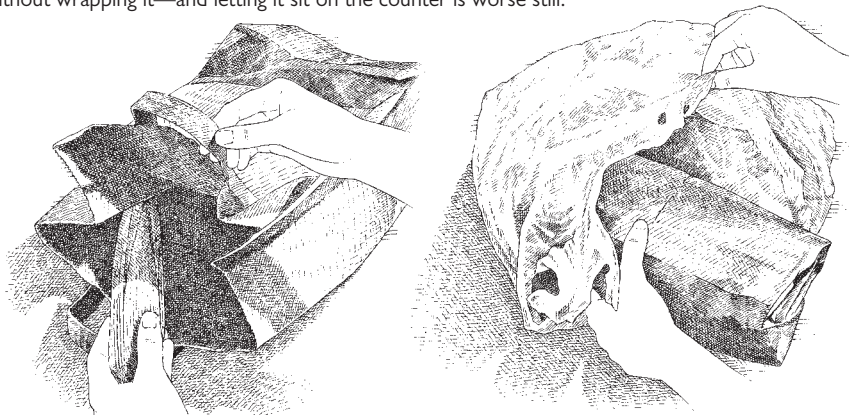
1. Wash the berries in a bowl with 3 cups water and 1 cup white vinegar. Drain in a colander and rinse under running water.



2. Place the berries in a salad spinner lined with three layers of paper towels. Spin for 15 seconds or until the berries are completely dry. Store in a loosely covered paper towel-lined container.

Keeping Corn Sweet

The general rule with corn is to eat it the same day you buy it, as its sugars start converting to starches as soon as it is harvested, causing the corn to lose sweetness. Never refrigerate corn without wrapping it—and letting it sit on the counter is worse still.



1. Wrap the unshucked corn in a wet paper bag to slow down the conversion from sugar to starch.

2. Place the wet paper bag in a plastic bag (any shopping bag will do) and refrigerate.

PRODUCE FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH?

Two products now in the produce aisles of some supermarkets claim to slow the aging process of greens as well as fruits and other vegetables. One is Evert-Fresh Green Bags, green plastic bags used to store produce; the other is ExtraLife, green plastic disks that are tossed into the crisper drawer. Both products use a mineral called zeolite that is said to absorb ethylene, the ripening gas emitted by most fruits and vegetables (see "Ethylene: Enemy of Freshness," page 16).

To test the effectiveness of these products, we refrigerated red leaf lettuce, green beans, cucumbers, and cantaloupes according to the products' instructions. A third set of produce was stored without any life-extending product.

The ExtraLife disks (\$3.98 for one, which is to last for three months) were a complete waste of money, doing nothing to extend the life of the fruit or the vegetables. The Evert-Fresh bags (\$3.98 for 10) seemed to have no effect on the melon or the cucumber, but did buy the lettuce and the beans a couple of extra days.