

Enjoy "Extra" Onions, Peppers, Green Tomatoes in the Winter Season

How is your gardening growing this year? Any extra onions, peppers, green tomatoes? Here are some ways that you can preserve these foods and enjoy them in the winter season.

Freezing onions -- Whole bulb onions store well in a cool, dry place. But onions can also be frozen in diced or sliced form so they can easily be used in cooking. Onions do not require blanching before freezing, which makes that a quick and easy way to safely preserve onions for later use in dishes such as soups, stews and casseroles.

To freeze diced onions, simply peel, trim and clean the onions thoroughly. Dice the onions into approximately ¼-inch pieces. Then either pack dry into freezer bags or containers, leaving ½ inch of headspace, OR freeze separated pieces on a clean tray prior to packaging. Eliminate as much air as possible from the package before storing in the freezer. Frozen onions are best if used within a few months.

Freezing Peppers – Sweet or bell peppers can be frozen without blanching. Select crisp, tender, green or bright red pods. Wash, cut out stems, cut in half and remove seeds. If desired, cut into ½-inch strips or rings. Package, leaving no headspace. Seal and freeze.

Bell or sweet: Sweet or bell peppers can be frozen without blanching. Blanched peppers are limp and easier to pack but only suitable for cooked dishes. Select crisp, tender, green or bright red pods. Wash and cut peppers in half, removing stems, seeds, and white membrane. Cut into ½-inch strips or rings, or dice depending on use.

Hot peppers: Wash and stem. Package raw. Seal and freeze. Caution: To prevent burning your hands when handling hot peppers, wear rubber gloves. Do not touch your eyes.

GREEN tomatoes? When a frost is in the forecast, head out and harvest those green tomatoes. Here are some ways to use them:

Selection and picking tips: Pick ripe, nearly ripe and mature green fruits before a frost occurs. Mature green tomatoes are those with a glossy, whitish-green fruit color and of mature size. Select fruits from strong healthy vines, and free of disease, insect or mechanical damage. Remove stems to prevent from puncturing each other. If dirty, gently wash. Allow to air dry.

Storage tips: Store tomatoes one to two layers deep in boxes, or in plastic bags with a few holes for air circulation. If you have a cool, moderately humid room, simply place them on a shelf. Keep tomatoes out of direct sunlight.

As tomatoes ripen, they naturally release ethylene gas, which stimulates ripening. To slow ripening, sort out ripened fruits from green tomatoes each week. To speed up ripening, place green or partially ripe fruits in a bag or box with a ripe tomato.

Green, mature tomatoes stored at 65–70 degrees F will ripen in about two weeks. Cooler temperatures slow the ripening process. At 55 degrees F tomatoes will slowly ripen, and be of inferior quality. Too much humidity will cause mold and rot. If the humidity is too low, the fruit may shrivel and dry out. You will need to figure out what works best for you.

Tomatoes ripened indoors are not as flavorful as vine-ripened fruits. However, compared to store-bought tomatoes, you will be delighted with your own home-ripened tomatoes.

If you are interested in more information on food preservation (canning, freezing, dehydrating) go to the KSU Rapid Response Center web site: www.rrc.ksu.edu.