

Squeeze the Most Out of Final Tomato Harvest

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, Nov. 24, 2018

Q: I still have lots of green tomatoes in my garden, is there a way to keep them from freezing so that I can have tomatoes longer into the winter?

A: Now that we're starting to get fall frosts it's best to pull up the entire tomato plant and hang it upside down in your garage or garden shed or another cool dry place with the fruit still on the plant. This allows the fruit to ripen slowly over a week or two without the it freezing. Once it freezes the cells in the fruit are damaged and it will spoil quickly. When the leaves on the hanging plant are mostly dry, pick the fruit and store on the counter for up to a week. If the fruit is still not ripe after this process, but is fully formed and a light green color, you can ripen by placing in a bag overnight with a banana or apple. Or you can use the green fruit to make green tomato relish or fried green tomatoes, both yummy ways to use green fruit.



A close up of tomatoes in a wooden crate.(Photo: Getty Images)

According to the UC Davis Post Harvest website, “mature green tomatoes can be stored up to 14 days prior to ripening at 12.5°C (55°F) without significant reduction of sensory quality and color development. Decay is likely to increase following storage beyond two weeks at this temperature.”

This would be the time after you picked them from the drying vine but before you ripened with the banana in a bag. They will usually keep up to seven days if already ripe. Tomatoes should always be stored out of direct sunlight on a counter, not in the refrigerator, for best flavor.

To find out more about ripening and storing tomatoes, or any other fruit or vegetable, check out the UC Davis postharvest fact sheets at http://postharvest.ucdavis.edu/Commodity_Resources/Fact_Sheets/. Once you're on the website, just click on the picture of the fruit or vegetable to read about the best way to care for and store it to ensure the longest shelf life and best flavor. Another resource on this website is the Post-Harvest table that shows what is the best storage method for different fruits and vegetables: <http://postharvest.ucdavis.edu/files/230110.pdf>. This is a two-page paper that's a great quick reference for how to get the longest shelf life from your produce. For example, it's best to ripen pears on the counter and then store in the refrigerator. If you're storing winter squash and pumpkins, keep them on the counter at room temperature.

When storing produce either from your garden or the grocery store, there are some things you want to avoid. Here are a few:

- Don't put ripe fruits and veggies in the same crisper because the fruit will give off ethylene gas. This can damage many veggies, causing yellowing of greens and celery, russet spotting on lettuce, toughening of asparagus, sprouting of potatoes, and bitter taste in carrots.
- Don't store root crops next to fruits and leafy veggies unless they are in separate bags because they may cause off-flavors.
- Don't put wet fruit into the refrigerator because it will mold.