

Root Cellar in a Box

By Rory Groves



Our root-cellar-in-a-box overflows with potatoes. Photo by Rory Groves

Spring starts with a bang around here—planting seeds, preparing beds, mulching and weeding. Throughout the summer we enjoy fresh greens, ripe strawberries, and the incomparable BLT (with our own bacon and tomatoes). But by harvest time in Fall, we are ready to whimper. We often find ourselves too tired to preserve the harvest we worked so hard to cultivate all summer long.

Spring's inspiration to "build a root cellar this year!" has faded along with our energy levels, which are focused by this time on splitting wood and settling in for winter. The root cellar will have to wait, yet again.

But what to do with the Yukon Golds, the Red Norlands, the Danvers Carrots? Over the years, we've tried many approaches to storing root vegetables with varying results. But our spuds kept sprouting within a few months and the carrots would dry out, leaving us without homegrown roots for most of the winter.



All hands on deck for the potato harvest. Photo by Rory Groves

All of that changed when we discovered this easy method for preserving our root crops. The idea is simple and anyone can do it, regardless of space (or energy levels). All you need is a sturdy box and a generous supply of peat moss. It works especially well for potatoes and carrots. We call it a root-cellar-in-a-box. It has worked very well for us and preserves the harvest well into spring, as long as we do our part to maintain it.

Step 1: Build your box



Root-cellar box. Photo by Rory Groves

We built our boxes out of ¾-inch plywood. The dimensions were approx. 3-ft long by 1-ft wide by 1-ft deep. A small box can hold a lot of potatoes! These were built to fit easily into the coldest corner of our basement. We also built a divider in the box for sturdiness and to group breeds together.

Step 2: Layer your roots



First layer of potatoes. Photo by Rory Groves

After building a box to suit your space, place a 3-inch layer of peat moss on the bottom. You can buy a bag of peat moss from the garden store for about \$10 that will likely supply far more than you need for this project. Peat moss keeps pretty well, so you can store the leftovers or share with neighbors.

Next, place a layer of potatoes or carrots in the box and cover with another inch or so of peat moss. Try to space the root vegetables so the peat moss can fall in between. This will help with distribution of moisture and minimize rotting.



Potatoes covered with peat moss. Photo by Rory Groves

Continue layering the roots and peat moss until you fill up the box or run out of roots. Leave at least 3 inches at the top of the box to cover with peat moss.

Finally, cover your box with a sturdy lid that light will not penetrate.

Step 3: Keep moist and enjoy

The key to preserving a root crop harvest is keeping the environment dark, cool and humid. Peat moss is a perfect medium for this because it holds moisture so well. And the layering approach prevents light from sneaking into the box.

Over the course of the winter, open the lid and add water to the peat moss. You can either spray or gently dribble water from a jar. The amount of water needed depends on the size of your box, it's construction (wood holds water better than cardboard, which wicks water away), and the vegetables being stored (carrots need more water than potatoes).

You will have to experiment with this, but a good rule of thumb is to water about once a week. The peat moss does an excellent job absorbing the moisture and distributing it around the box. You don't want the moss to be soggy (too wet), but you don't want it to be dusty either (too dry).

This small and simple "root-cellar-in-a-box" will help us preserve the harvest each winter until that day when our energy levels catch up with Spring's inspiration and we can build a proper root cellar.

Until then, enjoy the harvest!



Enjoy the potato harvest. Photo by Rory Groves

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