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Now's the Time to Harvest Onions and Potatoes

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

On top of picking tons of tomatoes, cukes, zukes and peppers, the onions and potatoes are about ready for harvest. Actually, both onions and potatoes can be harvested throughout the summer as they grow and mature. Feel free to pluck an onion or two, especially the sweet red ones, as the bulbs form and add to salads or sandwiches. Once potato plants start blooming, you can reach down and start searching for tender new potatoes great for those new potato salads.

As the days shorten and cool, onion sets or plants set out in the spring as well as seed potatoes put all their remaining energy into their bulbs and tubers. As they do this, the foliage dies down as it is no longer needed. Onions signal this stage by simply flopping over. Potato foliage just seems to turn brown. This should put gardeners on alert that harvest time is near.



As they mature, onion stems just flop over. Once about 80 percent of your onion patch does this, it is time to push the other 20 percent down into this same position. Then, wait a couple of weeks if the weather stays on the dry side. The onions are continuing to mature and ripen.

After 2 weeks, the digging or pulling up of the onions can commence. Brush off any loose soil and set them in the sun to dry for a few hours. Those large plastic flats that annual cell packs come in are useful for this purpose. Then brush off any more soil and start the curing process.

Image by D. Pettinelli

Depending on your preference, the leaves of the onions can be cut off or left to dry on the bulb. If not braiding, I usually cut the foliage back but do so at least an inch above the bulb or it may not dry properly. Bulbs should be dry from basking in the sun so the curing can begin.

Ideally, onions would be cured in a dry, airy place. A sunroom would be perfect but they could be spread out on a deck, a driveway or even the back of a pickup truck. The goal is to dry the bulbs enough to store but not give them sunburn. So, on sunny sites, the bulbs could be spread out and covered with thin cotton sheeting or I just use a row cover. This continues for about 2 weeks but may be shortened or lengthened if wet weather threatens. Basically, the longer you cure your onions, the longer they will keep but their storage capacity also depends on the variety. Some just store better than others.

Once cured, the roots should be dried and wiry, and the paper sheath wrapping the bulbs should feel crinkly. Then, if leaves were left on, they could be braided. Otherwise try to keep them around 40 F degrees and in a dark area, less they sprout. Any onions with green necks or obvious damage should be immediately used, if possible, and not stored.

Potatoes too are showing signs that they are ready to be harvested. Gardeners will notice that their stems and leaves are turning brown and dying back. Plants are sending what is left of their energy to their tubers.

Like onions, potatoes should be harvested on a dry, sunny day. Some prefer to use a garden fork, while others a shovel. Start exploring at least a foot or more from the plant so find out where most of the potato tubers are. Your goal is to dig up the potatoes while doing the least amount of injury to them. It is very easy to spear a potato so plan on using these for tonight's dinner.

Healthy tubers can be roughly cleaned of excess soil and spread out for a few hours to dry in the sun. Some like to use a soft brush to remove a bit more soil before these tubers are also cured before storing.

Potatoes should be cured for 1 to 2 weeks before storing. Like onions, their storage life depends on the variety chosen. While onions are cured in the light, potatoes are cured in the dark, or at least in dimly lit locations. After the initial exposure to the sun and brushing off of soil, potato tubers should be cured for 1 to 2 weeks at 60 F degrees and high humidity.

Often home gardeners complain of the greening of potato skins. Many folks know that if potato tubers are exposed to light, the skin and underlying flesh turns green. This is due to the formation of a toxic substance known as solanine. This condition will occur if maturing potatoes are not covered by enough soil and exposed to sunlight, if harvested potatoes are left in the sun too long or if potato tubers are not stored in complete darkness. In any case, just cut out the green areas and use as intended.

For many home gardeners often a basement will come close to meeting potato and onion storage requirements. Another option for those lacking a root cellar would be to store onions and potatoes in a second refrigerator. Keep in mind that the higher storage temperatures are, the shorter the shelf life of the onion or potato. With cool fall weather on its way, come up with creative recipes using these garden bounties and you'll probably find long term storage is not a problem.

For more information on harvesting and storing onions and potatoes, or for other horticultural topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.