

# 10 Things to Consider When Building a Root Cellar

By Jennifer Poindexter

Imagine being able to enjoy fresh, organic produce year-round. Now imagine the same without having to pay outrageous off-season grocery store or farmer's market prices. What you have just imagined is called a "root cellar." The root cellar is increasingly becoming a fixture for both city and country people who don't want to spend too much electricity on a fridge. It doesn't require much space or any significant cost investment to create a root cellar that can serve your family's health and wellness goals all year long.

In this post, learn about the primary things to consider as you are building your own root cellar.

## Reuse, Recycle, Repurpose

Building a root cellar gives you a great excuse to poke around in your garage, basement or storage shed to see what materials you already have on hand. Trash cans, cinder blocks, buckets, tires, earth bags, even unused coolers can each make for a great start to your new root cellar.

## No A/C, No Heat — No Problem

Root cellars were a fixture on homesteads in the days before modern grocery stores. When the nearest town (or neighbor, for that matter) was a day's horse and buggy ride away, families needed a convenient way to store food for later use. So you don't need to provide your root cellar with temperature control so long as it is well ventilated and located in the right place.

## Speaking of Ventilation

An airtight space with adequate ventilation is the key to keeping your root cellar produce fresh and tasty for as long as you want to store it. Without ventilation, you risk spoilage due to mold, mildew, and simple rotting. You can ventilate through the walls or ceiling using simple plastic pipes available at any local home repair store.

## Location, Location, Location

The location of your root cellar will depend on a number of factors, including your local climate, your available space, how much produce you want to store and what materials you have to build with.

The best location will remain relatively cool and moist year-round. Underground is best if you can manage it. If you build an above-ground root cellar, try to locate it away from direct afternoon sun.

## **Maximizing Storage Space**

Some produce is more tolerant of changing temperatures or humidity levels than others. To offer each stored produce category its best chance of longevity, you may want to adopt a shelving system, storing produce that responds well to cool, wet conditions lower down and produce that prefers warm, dry conditions higher up.

Adopting a shelving system will also ensure you will have more room even in a small cellar and can store more different types of produce for future use.

## **Size Really Doesn't Matter**

When it comes to building a root cellar, it really doesn't matter whether the space you select is big or small. The simplest early root cellars were nothing more than a hole dug right into the fresh earth with a few wood planks nailed together and placed on top of it to keep out foraging wildlife. This is still a great way to start out if you want to take some time to get the hang of growing and storing produce.

## **Yes, You Can Build a Root Cellar above Ground**

If the only space you have available is above ground-level, you can still build a root cellar as long as your local weather favors the cool and dry. For an above-ground root cellar, an existing workshop space, garage or storage building can work well.

A high deck or porch can also work if you can create an access path to the space beneath either. You can even conceivably use an attic crawl space, basement corner or stairwell nook for seasonal produce storage.

## **Close Your 'Food Pantry'**

If you think fresh produce is tasty, chances are good the local wildlife population does too. To this end, it is wise to think through how to secure your stored produce in advance. If you choose a receptacle like a garbage can or cooler, you may already have all the security you need.

But for outdoor or indoor spaces, including in your own home, you will likely need to take extra precautions against uninvited diners. Bird or deer mesh, hardware or garden cloths are all good options, as is chicken wire.

## **Freshness Checks are Not Optional**

One moldy apple or potato will quickly spread its spores to its neighbors. For this reason, it is important to schedule frequent checks of your stored produce so you can remove any spoiling items quickly.

Learning about where to store what types of produce (see tip 5 here) can also maximize the shelf life of your harvested, stored produce. With some careful planning and regular freshness checks, you can make sure all your hard work doesn't go to waste.

## **Know What Produce Will Store Well**

A root cellar by definition is best for storing root crops. These include carrots, potatoes, parsnips, beets, turnips, sweet potatoes, garlic, onions, leeks, yams, rutabagas and more. However, you can also store apples, tomatoes, bananas, broccoli, oranges, beans and other produce successfully.

If you feel intrigued but also a bit daunted by the idea of building your own root cellar, know this is totally normal! Remember, your first root cellar can be as small-scale and simple as you need or want it to be. Just a buried cooler or even a covered hole in the dirt can serve to store small amounts of appropriate produce to enjoy during the long winter months.

If you have personal or secondhand experience with building a root cellar, please feel warmly welcome to share your experiences here for others to learn from. We especially love root cellar success stories and how-to tips!

### Comments

Perhaps instead of screen you could try a piece of row cover over the vent shaft...

I would love to see explained how to make it "airtight with good ventilation" as well as bug/animal tight. I am having problems with this and can use advice. I have water seepage that adds too much humidity, when I vent it, the bugs are overjoyed, and seem to be able to get in through screen mesh...

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