

Backcountry Green Grocer

As we head into the 21st century and have grown so used to having every convenience at our fingertips here in the "first world", we tend to forget that people thrived quite well before frost-free refrigerators and microwave ovens. In fact, many of the items we refrigerate today survive quite well without the big chill. This is especially true for many fruits and vegetables...some of which may even taste better if kept at "room" temperature. The following is a list of those fruits and vegetables that can travel with you and their life expectancies as additions to your moveable feasts. Extreme cold or extreme heat will greatly effect these estimates, but there are always ways to cheat...

Vegetables

Tomatoes: 2-3 days

Cucumbers: 1-4 days if none are punctured or bruised

Eggplant: 3-4 days

Summer or Zucchini squash: 2-4 days

Romaine lettuce: 2 days in a "cheater pack" cooler.

Iceberg lettuce: why bother?

Avocados: 2-4 days depending on ripeness

Fresh Mushrooms: from 0 to slime in 2-3 days...dried work best.

Chinese or celery cabbage: 3-5 days

Red or Green cabbage: immortal

Bell peppers: up to 7 days

Onions: 2-4 weeks

Fresh garlic: 2-4 weeks

Beets: 4-8 days

Carrots: whole and unpeeled--4-8 days

Red or white potatoes: up to a month

Sweet potatoes: up to a month

Fresh Fruits:

Peaches: you wish!

Plums: 2-6 days

Bananas: 3 days to a week if they are not abused

Cantaloupe: 2-5 days depending on ripeness at outset

Pineapples: same as above

More fruits:

Apples: firm varieties will keep a week or more if they don't get bruised

Grapes: 2-3 days

Citrus fruits: 1 to 2 weeks

Kiwi fruit: 2-4 days if kept unbruised

Blueberries: 1-3 days

Watermelon: fun to watch someone try to get it out of a hatch...

How do you do it?

Avoid death by suffocation

Our little nutrient laden friends need air to survive! Various sizes of mesh bags work very well at preserving a variety of fruits and vegetables as lively contributing members to your meals. You will truly be amazed at how well things keep even at very warm temperatures. Certain things need a little tenderness though...bananas, apples, grapes, avocados, tomatoes. Not only do they need air but they need a rigid container to protect their fragile hides. One way to create safe havens for these items is to collect a variety of rigid resealable containers, slip into a testosterone frenzy and drill 'em full of small holes...all in the quest of tenderness, of course. Reusing old plastic gourmet ice cream tubs works well for this.

Keep them in the shade

Try to break contact with the ground and any small critter competition you may have by hanging your produce up in the shade under a tree. If you are traveling by canoe or kayak, nestle your most perishable items down below the waterline against the hull and cover other insulating layers like raingear, or sleeping pads (not recommended for bear country, however).

Cheat!

For some of the most perishable items, I cheat. On canoe trips that do not require long carries and sea kayak trips I often carry a "cheater pack"--a soft-sided, durable 15-20 Qt. cooler containing several frozen items and the most sensitive produce on the top. Romaine lettuce, snow peas, berries and fresh herbs all live a significantly extended life due to such blatant exploitation of the rules. Hard frozen block ice lasts the longest. I like to freeze potable water in plastic two qt. milk jugs for an ice supply. The meltwater doesn't spoil your food and you can use it later. Still more ice can be created by freezing canned beer (really) or using frozen meats, juices and berries that make nice treats later. I have even used dry ice to keep ice cream for a surprise 40th birthday strawberry sundae!