That fresh carrot taste can be your for months with a little care and attention

Home grown fruit and veg always tastes much better than shop produce, and a lot of people think organically-grown food has an even better flavour. Does this apply to root crops, like carrots, and what’s the best way of keeping them fresh and tasty over the winter?

Like so many vegetables, carrots have their best, sweetest flavour when small, tender and freshly dug, but they will still be a pleasure to eat until they start becoming flaccid and rubbery – a sure sign of ‘going over’. Because they are a biennial root crop, they store up energy in roots during the first season, go dormant over the winter and then flower the next summer. These roots should stay tasty once dug and will keep well, if looked after properly.

Some gardeners like to lift and store the crop in boxes. To do this, they dig the carrots carefully, cut back the foliage close to the root and wash off the soil to prevent any fungal damage during storage. Finally, the much cosseted carrots are kept in a frost-free place in damp sand. As with all stored vegetables, it’s vital to keep the carrots moist: while they’re growing, they absorb the liquid they require, but once harvested, they stop doing so. The vegetables must be kept damp, but not wet, to prevent the dehydration that would result in wrinkly, rubbery specimens.

It’s also important not to store carrots close to apples. When in store, apples give off ethylene, a gas that first encourages crops to ripen and then to decay, and if carrots are exposed to this chemical, their dormancy will be broken and they will start to become as soft and flaccid as when they dry out.

An alternative method is clamping. Clamps were first used in the 16th Century to keep harvested potatoes, but carrots have also been stored this way. A trench was dug round the base of the clamp to take away any rain that fell on it. The carrots were placed on a thick layer of straw and then covered with more straw and earth, all mounded up in a triangular shape. And if this wasn’t enough of a performance, there were holes, plugged with straw, to ensure good ventilation. Good air circulation is vital when storing any fruit or vegetables.

If you don’t fancy nipping out to the clamp for a few carrots, you could always try a technique which is preferred by Arthur Simons in his “New Vegetable Grower’s Handbook” 1945. “If you have a really dry patch of ground close to the kitchen door, dig out a hole, line with roofing felt or a piece of surplus linoleum, put a box [in the hole], put in your carrots, and put on a lid of wood, asbestos sheeting or any suitable material out of which you have [already] cut a hole large enough to enable you to put in your hand and arm to draw the carrots out. Close this hole with a flat piece of paving stone. Then cover the rest with straw and 6” of soil. Finally cover with a tent-shaped roof of corrugated iron to throw off the rain.”

Fortunately, none of us need break up the patio to follow these instructions, but we should keep the level of heat right. You prevent fruit or vegetables from deteriorating by keeping the temperature just above a plant’s freezing point. This varies from species to species, with Jerusalem artichokes starting to freeze at -2.2°C and endives at -0.3°C, but commercial chilling units compromise by storing most of our vegetables at 0°C. We must also make sure, wherever we store our carrots, that they stay cool, but don’t freeze.

It’s no surprise that commercial carrot growers have eschewed the appeal of clamps for the open ground. The crop is left in the soil, beneath a layer of polythene covered by 30-60cm of
straw. The polythene keeps the ground moist without becoming wet, and the soil temperature remains cold enough, right through till May if required.

This mulching technique is one I certainly wouldn’t recommend to gardeners! Just think of the countless millions of slugs sheltering beneath the plastic, silently chomping their way through a crop. I dread to think of the chemicals that growers must use to control the pests!

Leaving the crop in the ground, though, is probably the best approach, provided the soil is free-draining and certainly not waterlogged. Most of us will have eaten all our carrots before the really icy weather sets in. Very few folk actually have enough land to grow a year’s worth of carrots and, in any case, harvesting them in the middle of January can’t be much fun. When it’s dark at 3 ‘o clock and the ground’s as hard as iron, who wouldn’t be tempted to get a bag of peas out of the freezer rather than venture into the gloaming with a pick axe? And whatever you do, taste does start to deteriorate soon after Christmas. If a horribly cold snap is forecast before you’ve finished your carrots, either lift what’s left or give it an extra covering of soil. And harking back to last winter, how could anyone find carrots, parsnips, neeps or leeks under that blanket of snow? This time, I’ll think ahead and mark each end of the row with a stick. That should keep my fingers pink, not blue.