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The Essential Storage Tips for Food Preservation

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A Guide to Preserving Groceries in Bulk

Here's a story you know too well: It's Saturday morning, and you wake up craving moi moi—steaming hot, garnished with fish, eggs, and all the good stuff. The weekend is here, a break from capitalism, so what better time to indulge? After a quick workout to boost your energy, you head to the kitchen, ready to get to work.

A big paint bucket of oloyin beans sits in the pantry. You pull it out, set it on the counter, and grab a bowl to scoop a few cups. But the moment you open the lid, two oversized weevils parachute into the air... and vanish. You blink, trying to process what just happened, when more start crawling up the sides, some squeezing out from tiny holes in the grains. A dozen escapees later, you slam the lid shut and sigh. Your beans are infested.

Groceries cost a lot, whether for personal use or business. So if you've ever had to toss out food—staples, fruits, proteins, vegetables, or peppers—because of spoilage, you know that it aches. That stinging feeling as you mentally calculate the financial worth of the loss. The nagging questions: Did I store it wrong? Have prices gone up now that I'd need to replace this? Why's this happening at this time, to me?

Knowing how to store groceries won't make them last forever, but it will spare you the heartbreak of watching another bucket of potatoes or basket of onions go bad too soon. In this guide, we'll walk through essential storage tips for different food types, from sugary fruits to smoked fish.
But first—what are some common food storage challenges?

Common Food Storage Challenges

Food storage challenges are peculiar to different locations based on certain factors like weather conditions, overall environmental cleanliness, availabilty of storage space, and power supply. Some consistent challenges include:

Pest Infestation

Three main pest groups assail groceries: rodents, insects, and birds. In many homes, rodents and insects are the enemies at work.

If grains like beans or rice are stored without proper sealing, pests can burrow in, lay eggs, and multiply.

Once pests infest a batch of food, they can spread to nearby groceries, making it difficult to control the damage.

Moisture and Mold

Leave a portion of bread in a humid room for a day or more and watch mold consume it. Damp conditions create a perfect environment for mold growth, which can ruin everything from bread to tubers like yams and potatoes. Even dry food items like beans, flour, and nuts can develop mold if stored in humid conditions.

Excess moisture can also cause sprouting in items like onions and garlic, reducing their shelf life. Once mold sets in, it spreads rapidly, contaminating nearby food and making it unsafe for consumption.

Limited Storage Spaces

You can't store groceries in a refrigerator if you don't have a refrigerator. The lack of access to suitable storage spaces can make it difficult to preserve the durability of some grocery items.

Small kitchens or storage areas can lead to food being stacked in ways that restrict airflow, causing faster spoilage.

This applies to businesses that buy in bulk as well; you need efficient storage solutions to avoid losses, but without proper organization, food can get lost in the pile and expire before use.

Frequent Power Outages

In Nigeria, stable power supply is a privilege, not a norm.

Without this stability, frozen foods can thaw and refreeze, leading to bacterial growth and potential food poisoning.

Fresh produce or fruits kept in refrigerators during outages lose their crispness and rot faster.

Infrequent power supply also makes it tasking to store perishable proteinous foods like meat, dairy products, and seafood.

Cross Contaminiation

When groceries are stored without the right separation, bacteria and strong odours can spread, contaminating different foods and affecting taste. For instance, placing fresh produce near raw proteins like fish or meat can introduce harmful bacteria, increasing the risk of foodborne illnesses. Similarly, storing dry foods like rice and beans near onions or garlic can lead to flavor absorption, altering their taste.

This is why, for the next few pages, we'll take a look at the proper way to store groceries regardless of limited storage spaces or potential power outages. Let's get started.

Essential Storage Tips by Food Types

Different groceries have unique storage needs, so we've organized these tips by food type to help you store each item properly.

Vegetable and Fruits

Fruits and vegetables have a shorter lifespan than grains because they have higher moisture content, which makes them more prone to spoilage.

However, this moisture content is also responsible for their quality and freshness, so leaving fruits or vegetables out to dry will cause them to wilt, wither, or crack.

Carrots

Do you store carrots on the counter or directly in a refrigerator? The answer is...neither. Carrots are best preserved in an airtight container filled with water, which is then placed in the coolest corner of your fridge. Keep this container away from any fruit that releases ethylene, as this can trigger further ripening and advance the carrots' storage. Using this tip, you can keep your carrots fresh for up to four weeks, though you'll need to change the storage water every 3-4 days.

If you buy carrots with carrot greens, you want to cut off these greens and either discard them or store them in a separate container. Carrot greens, when connected to the carrots, can drain moisture and cause the carrots to crack or shrink. Lastly, except you'll make use of them soon, don't wash the dirt off your carrots before storing them. The residual moisture can soften the sticks, leading to spoilage.

Plantains

Unripe and ripe plantains have slightly different storage requirements. Many people who buy unripe plantains keep them in a cabinet or on the floor. Doing this ripens the plantains faster than you'd want.

To keep unripe plantains fresh, detach the bunches from the stem as this makes storage more efficient. Next, wrap the plantains in foil paper and store in a refrigerator for up to two weeks until you're ready to use. If you want unripe plantains to mature faster, keep them in a dark space in your kitchen. You can also wrap them in a thick polythene bag.

Peel and cut ripe plantains into desirable shapes then freeze for up to two hours. Once frozen, turn the plantains into a ziplock bag and refrigerate until you need it. Plantains will retain their texture and taste and can last up to six months when stored this way.

Cabbage

If you've been avoiding whole cabbages because you don't know how to store them, this one's for you. You can store cabbage, either as a whole or a half-piece, by securing it in a plastic bag or wrap and placing it in a refrigerator.

This will cause the cabbage to retain its moisture and preserve its freshness. Whole cabbages stored this way can last up to a month, while half-pieces will last up to 3 days. Before placing the cabbage in a plastic wrap or bag, do not wash. Do not wash.

Got some extra shredded cabbage that you need to keep? Pack them into an airtight container and tuck the container into the corner of your refrigerator. This keeps it usable for more than 24 hours.

Leafy Vegetables

Most leafy vegetables last longer when stored in airtight containers lined on both sides with tissue paper or any other highly absorbent material.

The absorbent material absorbs any residual moisture from the leaves, while the airtight material prevents air penetration, stopping oxidation in the leaves.

This applies to a range of vegetables including spinach, water leaves, lettuce, and bitter leaves.

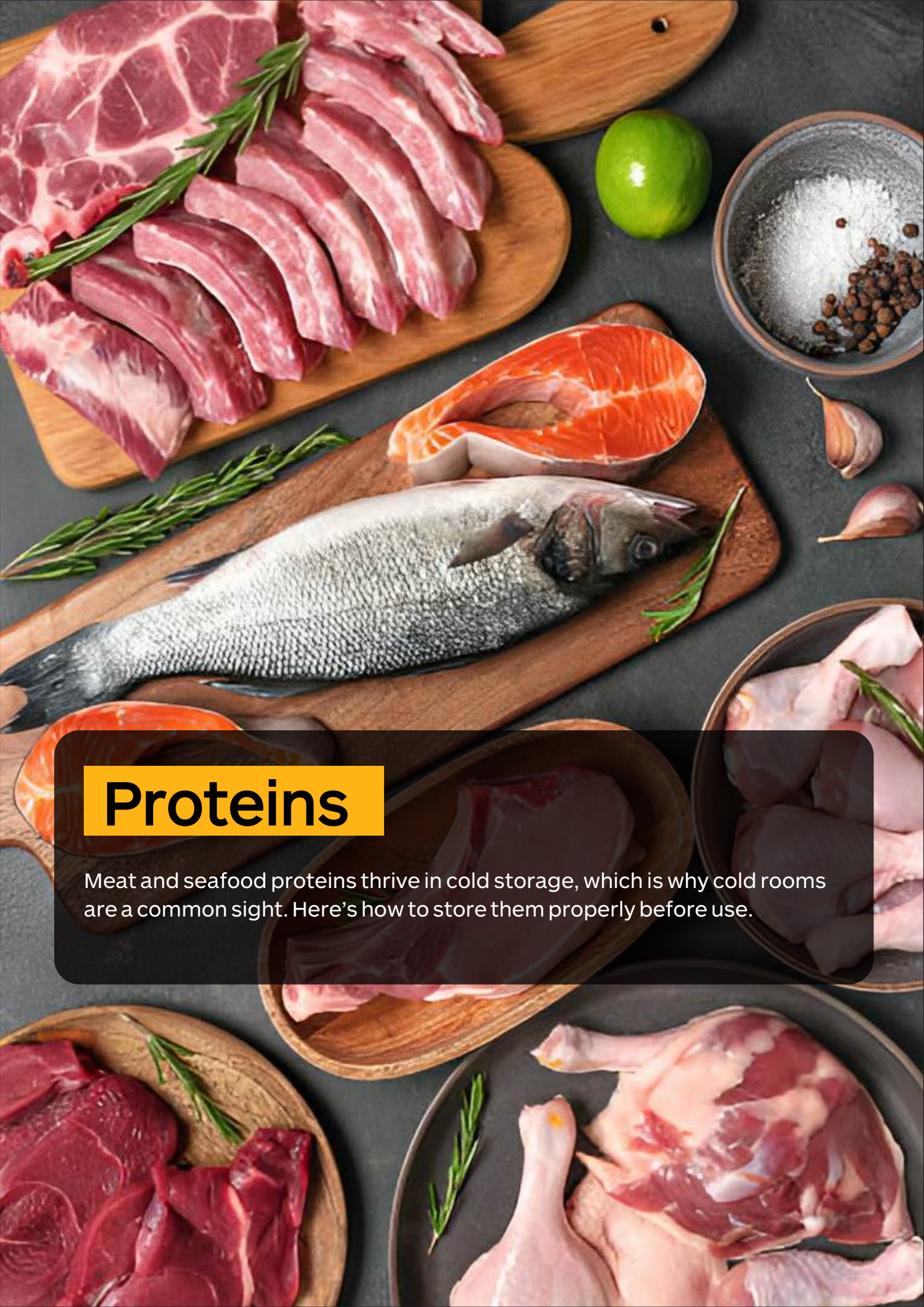
Mistake to avoid: Don't refrigerate fruits that don't belong in the fridge—mangoes, whole pineapples, bananas, etc.—and don't store ethylene-emitting fruits like apples and bananas with other fruits so you don't fasten their spoilage.

Sugary Fruits

High-sugar fruits like apples, watermelons, and pineapples are cool-friendly: store them in your refrigerator—not freezer—to keep them fresh for consumption. However, store each fruit in separate containers, as pineapples release ethylene that could speed up the ripening process in watermelons (or apples).

Watermelons also have a higher moisture content than other fruits and this makes them prone to absorbing odors from other fruits. Store whole, uncut watermelons and pineapples on the counter in your kitchen; they thrive better in a warm place.

Bananas, when unpeeled, are better suited for counters than refrigerators. Contact with moisture will fasten the softening and ripening of bananas. However, once peeled, you can cut them up and store them in airtight containers in the refrigerator, where they'll stay fresh for up to three days.



Proteins

Meat and seafood proteins thrive in cold storage, which is why cold rooms are a common sight. Here’s how to store them properly before use.

White Meat

White meat like chicken or turkey go in the...freezer. Yes, you got it. They need no special preservation tips. If storing for a short period (2-3 days), keep raw chicken or turkey in its original store packaging and place it on a tray in the fridge (below 4°C) to catch any drips.

For long-term storage, wrap them tightly in plastic and seal in airtight bags before placing in your freezer. White meat can last up to nine months if left frozen.

Once it's time to use, defrost in the fridge overnight. For a quick method, place the sealed package in cold water, changing the water every 30 minutes. Don't microwave unless you're cooking immediately.

Beef

Beef works like white meat when it comes to storage. For short-term storage, transfer the beef into an airtight container and store in the refrigerator.

Looking to keep the beef for longer? Portion the beef into meal-sized cuts, wrap tightly in plastic wrap or freezer paper, and place in ziplock bags before freezing. Label with the date to track freshness.

Properly stored beef can last 3-6 months in the freezer.

Fish

Fish show more fragility than white or red meat. This is because their muscles are arranged in short, thin sheets, and their collagen content is lesser than the quantity present in chicken or turkey. However, a bowl of frozen fish can stand up to a similar measure of frozen white meat.

When storing fish at home, clean and dry fish thoroughly before packaging. Wrap the fish in films, and then place inside plastic bags or airtight containers. If you're storing fillets, wrap each piece individually and store in plastic bags. This way, frozen fish can last up to six months.

Can you store cooked fish? In most cases, yes. You can store cooked titus, salmon, tilapia, or any other fish for up to 3 days of uninterrupted refrigeration or up to 2 months of freezing.

Seafood

You can store seafoods like prawns and crabs in plastic containers (for instance, empty ice cream containers). Place a few cubes of ice atop the prawns and then fill the container with water. You can place the container in a corner of your refrigerator, retaining the seafood's freshness for up to 48 hours. The ice cubes help the prawns cool down rapidly and prevent a temperature rise that could promote bacterial growth.

If storing for an extended period, clean and dry seafood before freezing. For prawns and crabs, remove shells if desired, then freeze in airtight bags with a bit of water to prevent freezer burn. Properly stored, prawns last 3-6 months, while crabs can last up to 3 months.

Eggs

When it comes to preservation, eggs are largely self-sustaining. Many people simply place them in trays or plastic bowls in their pantry and forget about them. However, exposure to moisture can encourage bacterial growth, so it's important to keep them dry.

What about refrigeration? If you're in the United States, it's a must. That's because eggs in the U.S. undergo a mandatory washing process before distribution, which removes the protective cuticle from the shell, making them more vulnerable to bacteria. In most non-U.S. markets, however, hens are vaccinated against diseases, eliminating the need for post-lay washing. Which means you don't have to refrigerate your eggs to extend their shelf life.

Stew Ingredients and Spices

In raw form, stew ingredients have one of the shortest lifespans of all groceries. Yet, you can retain their freshness and quality with the right tips.

Onions

The easiest way to store onions is to store in a perforated basket in a cool, dark place, away from direct sunlight.

Continuous exposure to sunlight can cause onions to sprout, causing spoilage. Ensure that the surface area of the storage space is dry and well-ventilated; good air circulation prevents moisture from acting on the onions.

You should also keep onions away from ethylene-releasing foods like apples, bananas, or sweet potatoes.

Tomatoes

Tomatoes are best stored based on their ripeness. Unripe tomatoes should be kept at room temperature away from direct sunlight to allow them to ripen evenly. Ripe tomatoes should be stored in a cool place and consumed within a few days.

If you have excess tomatoes, you can blend and store them in an airtight container in the freezer. You can also boil the blended tomato paste before freezing to remove excess moisture content. Tomatoes stored this way can last months.

Another method is sun-drying or oven-drying sliced tomatoes for longer preservation. You can store these dried tomatoes in airtight containers or grind into powdery form.

Scotch Bonnet Pepper

It's no surprise that ata rodo lasts long. Scotch bonnet peppers have a longer shelf life when stored in a paper bag inside the fridge or in a breathable container.

If you have a large quantity, freezing them whole or blended works best. You can dry scotch bonnets in the sun or use a dehydrator, as this also extends their shelf life.

Red Bell Pepper

As with scotch bonnet, you can store tatase in a paper bag or a breathable container in the fridge. Avoid washing these peppers before storing them, as moisture can encourage mold.

If keeping for long-term use, blend tatase and store in small containers in a freezer. Or, you can cut them into strips or cubes and freeze on a tray before transferring them to a freezer bag (this prevents them from clumping). You can also dry them and store in airtight containers.

Garlic

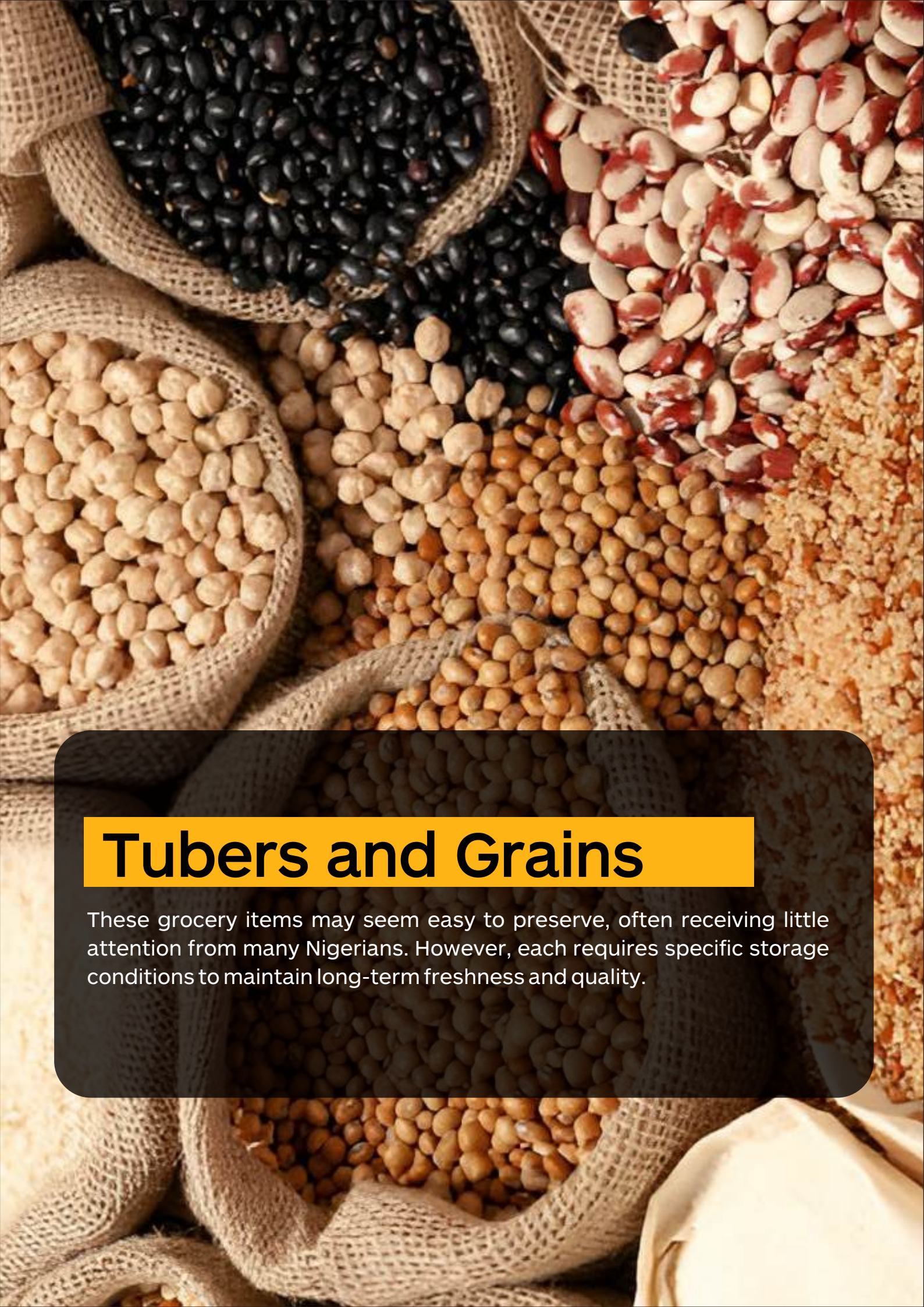
Garlic must be stored properly to prevent sprouting or bacterial growth:

- **Whole bulbs:** Store in a well-ventilated basket, mesh bag, or paper bag in a dry place. Never refrigerate whole garlic, as cold temperatures speed up sprouting.
- **Peeled cloves:** Store in an airtight container in the fridge for up to a week.
- **Chopped garlic:** Keep in a small jar with olive oil in the fridge. Use within a week and avoid storing at room temperature to prevent the risk of botulism (a harmful bacteria).
- **Frozen garlic:** Freeze peeled cloves in a single layer on a tray before transferring them into a freezer bag. This keeps them from clumping together.

Ginger

Ginger is another ingredient with a delicate shelf-life. Ginger stays fresh longer with these methods:

- **Short-term storage:** Keep unpeeled ginger in the fridge's vegetable drawer in a paper towel or breathable bag.
- **Long-term storage:** Store whole, sliced, or grated ginger in the freezer. Frozen ginger grates more easily. Another tip is to peel, slice thinly, and sun-dry or oven-dry at low heat, then store in an airtight container. If you'd rather make ginger paste, you can blend ginger with a little water and freeze in small portions.
- **Mistake to avoid:** Avoid storing stew ingredients together. Although they are often combined in cooking, their varying structures and preservation needs mean that a storage method suitable for one may not work for another.



Tubers and Grains

These grocery items may seem easy to preserve, often receiving little attention from many Nigerians. However, each requires specific storage conditions to maintain long-term freshness and quality.

Yam

Did you know you freeze uncooked yam to keep it from spoilage? While you don't have to cut up your tubers into pieces, freezing raw yam slices in plastic airtight bags keeps them fresh for over a month. And when you're ready to cook the yam, simply move them from "freezer to pot".

You can also preserve yams the traditional way—fresh yams last longer when stored in an airy spot away from moisture and direct sunlight.

Stacking yam tubers on wooden racks prevents heat build-up and potential rotting. Peeled, sliced yam can also be dried under the sun to make yam chips, which are later ground into yam flour (elubo).

Potatoes

Though market traders often display yams and potatoes side by side, the two have very different preservation needs. To extend the shelf-life of potatoes:

- Keep potatoes in a cool, dry place, out of direct sunlight. Suitable locations include a pantry or a basement if you have one. Potatoes are best kept between 45-55F (about 7.2-12.8C), which is below room temperature. Keeping them in room temperature can cause rapid dehydration, leading to withered potatoes. And keeping them in a cold place—like your refrigerator—will convert the starch in potatoes to sugar, altering its taste.

- Store potatoes in ventilated containers like baskets. Air circulation will prevent moisture build up.

- Don't place potatoes near groceries that emit ethylene such as apples, bananas, or onions.

Storing potatoes the right way can make them last several months.

Rice

Rice often lasts long under proper conditions. To store raw rice effectively, keep it in clean, dry, airtight containers to protect it from moisture, insects, and contaminants. Glass, plastic, or metal containers with tight-fitting lids work well. Store these containers in a cool, dry place away from direct sunlight; pantries or cabinets work well.

Avoid humid spots like those near stoves or sinks, as moisture can lead to mold or spoilage. To prevent pest infestation, you can add deterrents like dried bay leaves, garlic cloves, or dried chili peppers directly into the rice container; just ensure they're completely dry. For long-term storage, especially beyond six months, consider vacuum-sealing the rice or storing it in food-grade plastic bags placed in sealed buckets. Or, if that feels like too much, store rice in dry, airtight bags and seal them with staples.

Freezing the rice first for a few days can also help eliminate any insect eggs before transferring it to storage. And ensure you consume older rice before scooping from newer batches.

Beans

Some people add chemicals to beans to prevent weevil infestation. These chemicals can be toxic to the human system, offering as much benefit as risk.

One way we preserve beans at PricePally is to store the beans in dry, airtight containers and place neem leaves (dogorayo) in them. These leaves absorb residual moisture from leaves while neutralising any activities of weevils, given their strong herbal properties.

You can also store your beans in plastic bags and store them in your freezer. The icy temperature will freeze out weevils as well as eggs. Lastly, you can store beans by adding cayenne pepper and storing in an airtight container. This will suffocate the weevils and eggs, preventing any growth.

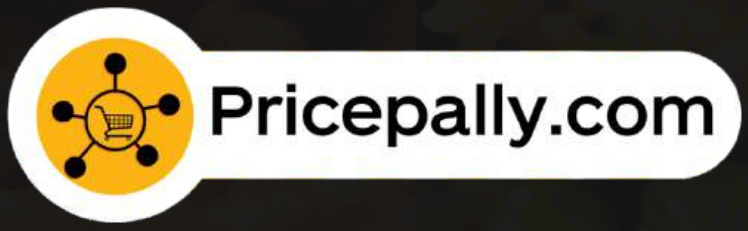
Garri

Garri should be stored in an airtight container to protect it from moisture and insects. Plastic buckets with tight lids, glass jars, or sealed plastic bags are all good options. Make sure the garri is completely cool and dry before storing, as any residual heat or moisture can lead to mold over time.

Keep the container in a cool, dry place away from direct sunlight and humidity, like a pantry or kitchen shelf. If you live in a particularly humid area, you can add a few dried chilli peppers or cloves to the garri to naturally deter insects like weevils.

For long-term storage, consider double-layering—placing the garri in a sealed bag, then storing that bag inside an airtight bucket. Some people even freeze small batches in airtight bags to keep them fresh for months (just let it return to room temperature before opening to avoid condensation)

Want more preservation tips to keep groceries fresher for longer? We curated a playlist of the best tips and hacks for our Padis. Simply click this link to watch the videos or scan the QR code below to access the playlist.



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