

Name _____

How to Build a Root Cellar

When my grandpa had a team of farmhands make the root cellar on what would eventually be my farm, they had to dig it out by hand with shovels since they didn't have a tractor in those days. That was no small job since the roof of the root cellar had to be below the frost line (at least six feet below the surface). That's a lot of dirt to move, especially since they had to put it back when the root cellar was finished!

The first thing they did was pick a place for the root cellar so that it would be close enough to the house to get to safely in the winter. They dug a hole that was about 25 feet by 35 feet. Next, they constructed a floor and four walls made out of concrete, leaving a door frame and stairs on one side.

When the concrete was dry the men set thick boards across the top for the ceiling/roof and covered that with tar paper to keep the moisture out. The interior walls and the wood had to be sprayed for moisture as well because there was always the danger of water getting in. They drilled a hole and inserted a pipe for ventilation. The final step was pushing six feet of dirt back over the top.

The finishing touches included a door at the bottom of the stairs and two doors at the top. (These doors were flat on the ground and snow had to be shoveled off during the winter.) Large bins were built on one wall to hold potatoes, onions, carrots and beets. These bins looked very much like horse stalls in the barn and they were 3 feet wide, ten feet deep and 6 feet high. Lots of shelves were added in rows to hold hundreds of jars of vegetables and fruits that Norman's mother canned every summer. Her vegetable garden was usually half an acre in size and the potato patch was another half acre. There is and was a very short growing season in North Dakota, so preparations for filling the root cellar had to stick to a strict timetable.