

Home Garden Preservation (published 2026-09-26)

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One of the greatest joys of home gardening is the bountiful harvest that we reap - the literal fruits (and vegetables) of our labor! On the same token, that harvest can often be overwhelming when we are completely overtaken by the sheer amount of produce that is ready at the same time. In this article we will look at some ways to preserve the harvest from our home garden so that we can enjoy it far beyond the summer months.

Home Canning

Canning food is a common practice for preserving various types of food. When the proper processes and recipes are followed, home-canned food is shelf-stable for up to a year, and the food will retain its color, flavor, texture, and nutrients. The only two recommended processes for canning food are water bath canning and pressure canning. While other methods were once strong in popularity, scientific testing has now proven them unreliable and unsafe in the aspects of long-term preservation and the stoppage of bacteria growth.

Boiling water bath canning may only be used to safely process high-acid foods- most tomatoes, pickles, relishes, jams, jellies, marmalades, and fermented items. This method processes foods at 212 degrees F, which is sufficient to inhibit the growth of bacteria and deactivate the enzymes and microorganisms that would cause spoilage of the product being canned. While specific water bath canners are available, water bath canning is able to be conducted in any large pot with a lid with the addition of a rack to protect the bottom of the jars.

Pressure canning must be used for all meat products and low-acid vegetables. In order to preserve these products safely, a temperature of at least 240 degrees F is needed, which cannot be achieved without the use of pressurization for an extended amount of time. While pressure canners were once heavy and daunting to use, newer models are much more user-friendly and have multiple safeguards built into their design. Model-specific directions should be included with each canner or available online. It is important that these directions be carefully followed to ensure the safety of the pressure canning process as well as the successful and safe preservation of the food.

Freezing

Freezing food is the best method of preservation in terms of nutrients, flavors, and colors. It is often the easiest method of preservation, provided that freezer space is available. It can make meal planning and preparation much easier, as food can be frozen in amounts and combinations specific to particular recipes and preferences.

In order to freeze items from the home garden, top-quality, blemish-free items should be carefully chosen. Freshness of the product is crucial to successful quality retention during freezing, and quick transfer from garden to freezer is essential to protect the nutrient content of the product. In order to reduce the number of microorganisms,

remove surface dirt, and decrease pesticide residues, all fruits and vegetables that will be frozen should be rinsed thoroughly. Additionally, most vegetables require blanching before freezing in order to maintain quality and stop the action of enzymes that can impact flavor, color, texture, and nutrient content.

Drying

Drying food is the oldest method of food preservation, but it can still be useful today. Simply put, drying food for preservation is removing the moisture from it so that bacteria cannot grow and cause spoilage. Food should be dried in a low-humidity environment at 140 degrees F regardless of the method used for drying. Food dehydrators are available for purchase, but a standard home oven can be used for drying if the temperature adjusts low enough and you have enough patience, as oven drying typically takes double the amount of time that a dehydrator would.

Food Preservation Guidance

While food preservation methods may seem simple or be something that has been passed down for generations, it is important that proper guidance be sought out for the specific food being preserved and the specific method being used. As scientific and technological advances have continued to emerge, so has the knowledge of what works and what does not work in terms of safe food preservation. Some methods that were once recommended have now been proven to be unsafe in terms of bacteria growth in the preserved food over time. Other methods simply have new recommendations of small changes that need to be made in the process in order to ensure the best end product possible.

Regardless of the method of preservation you have interest in, you can always reach out to your local UT Extension Family and Consumer Science Agent for guidance and direction.

Resources

“Canning Foods,” <https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2023/10/PB724.pdf>

“Freezing Foods,” <https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2023/10/PB1483.pdf>

How do I ask a question?

If you have questions for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.