

Preserving Your Organic Harvest

Want to eat the most healthful food—like local, organic fruits and vegetables—year round? Stocking up on produce you've grown yourself or purchased from a neighboring farmer—perhaps via a farmer's market, your local co-op, or a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program—makes it possible. Rather than purchase corn that's been shipped across the country mid-winter, you can open the freezer and grab a bag of organic kernels that you froze yourself (easily, by the way!) at peak harvest time. As a bonus, putting up your own food can cut not only your food's travel miles, but your own, too, by saving trips to the grocery store. It can help you maximize your food dollars, support local agriculture, and nurture a healthful relationship with the food you eat and serve your family.

Produce Possibilities

Here are just some of the fruits and veggies you'll often find fresh at the end of the summer/fall season: apples, beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, celery, corn, cucumbers, eggplant, garlic, grapes, green beans, greens (like chard, Chinese cabbage, head lettuce, kale), kohlrabi, melons, onions, pears, peas, peppers, potatoes, pumpkins, raspberries, snap peas, snow peas, spinach, string beans, summer squash, tomatoes, tomatillos, turnips, melons, onions, potatoes, pumpkins, raspberries, snap peas, snow peas, spinach, string beans, summer squash, tomatoes, turnips, and herbs (like basil, dill, marjoram, tarragon, and oregano).

A Few General Food Preservation Tips:

- Round up your ingredients and equipment ahead of time. Whether it's the pickling salt or a ring for your canning jar, you won't want to have to hunt it up mid-process.
- Label all of your preserved foods with the product name, date, and, if appropriate, recipe. (You'll want to be able to duplicate favorites!)

- Keep an inventory of items in storage, particularly your freezer, where it's hard to tell at a glance what's what. And rotate your stored food so the oldest product gets used first.

You Can Can

It's an idyllic vision of plenty: jars of pickles and chutneys, green beans and tomatoes, all lined up on the pantry shelf. If you're industrious, you might can enough fruits, vegetables, sauces, and condiments to nourish your family throughout the winter months. Or you may simply want to try your hand at canning your signature salsa or a handful of preserves to give as gifts. Canning takes a little time and know-how, but it's a skill well worth cultivating. Here's some background info by way of introduction:

- Use canning salt, not regular table salt; the additives in table salt can cause caking and clouding.
- Choose a good quality vinegar with 5 to 6 percent acidity.
- For high-acid foods like fruits and pickled vegetables and recipes containing vinegar, use a boiling-water bath.
- For low-acid foods (all vegetables except tomatoes, sauerkraut and pickles), pressure canning is your best bet.
- Raw (or cold) pack means that the uncooked fruits or vegetables are packed in jars, then covered with hot liquid and processed.
- Hot pack means that the food is precooked, then put in jars for processing.
- Even though you'd probably rather show them off, your canned goods will keep best if stored in a cold, dark place.

Curing Kraut

Curing food by salting and fermenting is an ancient food preservation method. It yields a product that's crisp but tender, salty and acidic. Sauerkraut is the classic example. But did you know you can also cure lettuce, Chinese cabbage, turnips, rutabagas, green tomatoes,

snap beans, cukes, and other veggies? All it takes is pickling salt, produce, a heavy-duty crock, and some patience (5- to 6-weeks worth to ferment kraut, but it's fun to watch for the gas bubbles that tell you the process is working!) Once the product is ready, simply pack into clean hot jars and process in a boiling water bath.

Freeze in a Flash

Freezing is often the easiest method of preserving produce. It's an especially good choice for asparagus, blueberries, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cantaloupe, cauliflower, corn, eggplant (in a casserole), green beans, lima beans, peas, peppers, pumpkin (puree), raspberries, rhubarb, snap beans, spinach, strawberries, summer squash, and wax beans.

- Choose fully ripe fruit and vegetables that are slightly immature.
- Blanch veggies before freezing by steaming or immersing in boiling water. This sets the color, retains vitamins, and stops ripening.
- Let cooked items (like sauce) cool to room temperature before freezing. When you first place in freezer, leave room around the container so air can circulate. Once frozen, stack with rest of items.
- To "flash freeze" berries, place on a metal sheet, freeze, and transfer when solid to freezer containers or bags. This method retains the shape of the fruit nicely.
- Prevent freezer burn by squeezing excess air out of freezer bags (but leave head room at the top of bags or containers for expansion of liquids).
- To freeze pitted fruit, rinse and gently dry. Cut unpeeled fruit in half, remove pit, and slice into wedges. Place in freezer containers or bags.
- Freeze fresh corn kernels simply by placing in a container or resealable plastic freezer bag.
- Freeze tomato sauce or juice (rather than tomatoes).
- To defrost fruit, run under cool water.
- Store frozen foods at 0 degrees F or less.

- Keep your freezer full for maximum energy efficiency (fill empty spaces with ice, if necessary).

Stay Cool with "Root Cellaring"

What could be simpler than placing fresh produce—no preparation necessary—in cool, covered conditions for the long haul? An old-fashioned root cellar is great, but all you really need is a cool, dark space that won't freeze. A barn, a box built of hay bales, an unfinished basement or cellar, or a trashcan sunk partway into the ground will work. You can even just dig a hole, line it with straw, and place vegetables in the hole, in layers, with straw on the bottom, top, and between the layers. (Of course, you might need a secure lid to keep animals from helping themselves.)

The best candidates for "keeping over" produce in its natural state are: apples, cabbage, green tomatoes, pears, potatoes, pumpkins, root crops (like beets, carrots, parsnip, turnips, and rutabaga), sweet peppers, sweet potatoes, and winter squash.

- Store only crops that are disease- and damage-free.
- Wipe, but don't wash the produce before storing.
- Place a thermometer in your storage area, to keep close tabs on the temperature.
- Allow potatoes to cure for a week or two at 60- to 75-degree temperatures before placing in storage.
- While most produce prefers temperatures just above freezing, winter squash likes the temps hovering around 50 degrees.
- Keep most produce dry, but root crops do well when stored in wet sawdust.
- Separate different crops to keep flavors from melding.
- Use straw on the bottom and between layers of produce to keep dry and separate.
- Wrap tomatoes (green keep best) separately, in newspaper.

Dehydration

No added ingredients necessary! Air circulation and heat—from the sun or a dehydrator—are all you need to dry many fruits and veggies for storage. The dehydrated product is easy to store, too.

- You can make simple drying racks out of untreated wood and screen. The racks, which can be stacked, are designed to keep the food off the ground and allow air to circulate underneath.
- Placing cheesecloth on the screen under the produce will help absorb the moisture.
- When drying produce in the sun, also cover with cheesecloth to protect from insects and birds.
- You can purchase a dehydrator, which evaporates the moisture. These are made up of stackable trays that sit over a heating element. Stovetop dryers are also available. (While our ancestors would dry produce in the warming oven of a wood stove, using your oven isn't an energy savvy method of dehydration, no matter how low the setting.)
- Don't dry food in the microwave; the food will usually burn before it dries.
- To make fruit leather, dry thin sheets of fruit purée.
- Another simple dehydration method is to string and hang herbs, onions, and garlic.
- To dry veggies, blanch them first, then dry in the sun or a dehydrator.
- Store dried produce in an airtight container in a dark place.

To learn more about food preservation, contact your local county extension service, find a good food preservation book (there are dozens, like *Putting Food By*, by Janet Greene, or *Keeping the Harvest*, by Nancy Chioffi and Gretchen Mead) or ask a local expert (find one through your food co-op!)

Members—Personalize this story by including text that answers the following questions:

- Do you offer classes or workshops on food preservation?
- Do you sell equipment and supplies for putting up food (like canning jars, canning salt, vinegar, dehydrators, etc.)?
- Is it possible for customers to purchase fresh, seasonal produce in bulk quantities for food preservation?
- Is it easy for customers to identify organic, seasonal produce?
- Can you help customers connect with CSA programs in your area?
- Do you sell products that local suppliers have put up—like preserves, chutneys, sauces, or relishes?