

Canning Food—Continuing an ancient tradition

As soon as you pick food from your garden it begins to spoil. Since ancient times man has found ways to delay or stop this process. In colder regions food was frozen. In areas where there was plenty of hot, dry weather people dried food. By the late 1790's canning was used as a way to preserve wine, and then later applied to food. Being able to preserve food meant that groups of people didn't just have to follow the food, but could preserve it for later use.

Today there are still lots of reasons why people want to save the produce from their gardens. Some use this as a method to save money, some people find joy in seeing all those jars with freshly grown fruits and vegetables, some like the fact that they know exactly what is in the final product, and others simply feel that home preserved food just tastes better.

Since the 1980's food scientists at USDA Centers for Home Food Preservation have been busy checking recipes and canning procedures for safety. As a result, new guidelines and recipes have been published to make sure that the food you process in your own kitchen is safe for you, your family and your friends. The University of Georgia publishes "So Easy to Preserve" and Ball Corporation continues to update their famous "Blue Book". Both are excellent references for canning procedures and recipes.

Here are some basic guidelines for safe home food canning.

Recipe: Your recipe should have been tested for safety. Granny's famous tomato sauce recipe was most likely developed for the more acidic tomatoes that were grown fifty or more years ago. Many of today's varieties are much sweeter and may not produce a product that is acidic enough to control the growth of botulinum bacteria that can create a fatal toxin. The USDA has been recommending adding lemon juice or citric acid to any canned tomato product to increase the acidity. Both books cited above feature reliable, tested recipes that can be used to produce a safe product. Finally, don't alter the recipes. Any variation may change the pH levels and compromise the safety of the finished product.

Ingredients: Choose the freshest, most blemish free products. For example, tomatoes with marks, bruises, brown spots and cracks may harbor microorganisms that will cause your end product to spoil, even if you follow all the directions carefully. Don't make substitutions. If you are concerned about sugar, use a recipe specifically designed to create a lower sugar product, don't reduce the sugar in a regular jam or jelly recipe. The same principle is true for salt in pickling recipes. Salt is part of what preserves the food; limiting the amount of salt will change the chemistry of the finished product, compromising the safety. Don't be tempted by the discounted bushel of seconds at your local farm stand if you are canning. Make up a homemade salsa instead, or eat the fresh produce immediately.

Equipment: Before your garden starts producing ripe vegetables, check your equipment. Pressure canners with dial gauges should be tested for accuracy. Contact your County Extension Office for a free gauge test. Also check that you have all the necessary parts for your canner. Is the sealing ring in good condition? Do you have enough jars and rings? Did you buy fresh lids that will seal properly? Prior planning will reduce the need to run to the nearest hardware store for supplies in the midst of the canning process.

Safety: Canning home grown food is designed to produce a safe, good tasting product. Follow a tested recipe. Keep your equipment and work area clean. Process your product for the time indicated in the recipe. Don't try shortcuts. When finished, let the jars cool naturally and then store them in a cool, dry place. Finally, enjoy the fruits of your labor. If you are concerned about the safety of a home canned product don't even try it. Dispose of the contents and sterilize the jar.

If you are new to home canning, there are plenty of resources to help you. UNH Cooperative Extension's website, www.extension.unh.edu offers fact sheets, recipes and links to reliable information under the Food Safety link. Trained volunteers at the Family, Home & Garden Education Center can help you with information about basic food preservation. If you're calling from New Hampshire you can reach them toll free at 1-877-398-4769 (outside New Hampshire call 1-603-629-9494). The University of Georgia's Extension Program provides an abundance of information as a National Center for Home Food Preservation. Their web site is www.uga.edu/nchfp/. You can always call your county's UNH Cooperative Extension Family & Consumer Resource Educator for information, recipes and assistance. The Grafton County office's phone number is 787-6944.

UNH Cooperative Extension and The Green Thumb will be hosting a food preservation demonstration at the nursery on Route 116 in North Haverhill on August 13th. Call The Green Thumb at 787-6022 for more information or to register.

Home canned foods can provide a wonderful opportunity to extend the harvest beyond our short growing season. Make sure you do it safely.

Look for next week's column from Heather Bryant, Agricultural Extension Educator.