

Yes, You Can!—Safely preserving the harvest from your garden

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My Dad used to grow the best tasting tomatoes. At the end of the season after we had our fill of juicy, red tomatoes, there was always had a surplus of green tomatoes. That's when my Mom got to work. She made sweet green tomato relish. After chopping, mixing, and grinding, the house was filled with the wonderful smell of cooking relish. She put the mixture into jars and stored them in the cellar. We ate that relish all winter long.

She canned her relish using the open kettle canning method. Food was cooked to a rolling boil then placed in clean containers, in our case instant coffee jars, covered and stored. There was no processing involved.

As food safety specialists began researching safe canning methods they recommended that people not use that open canning method and that all canned products be processed in a water bath or pressure canner. After I went to work for Extension and learned the "correct" way to preserve food, I bought my Mom a canner and jars so that she could produce a safer product. After going through the process the first season she remarked that it was a lot of work.

The new research also produced other controversial recommendations. Wax was not needed to seal jellies and jams, they should be water bath processed instead. All low acid vegetables such as peas, corn, beans should be processed in a pressure canner. Mason jars with glass lids should be replaced with glass jars and two piece lids. One other recommendation was that squash and pumpkin be preserved in cubes, not as a puree. Experienced food preservers were reluctant to make the changes.

All the recommendations that the United States Department of Agriculture uses are based on science. The ultimate goal is to make sure that the product in the jar is safe for everyone to eat. Following USDA recommendations means that there is less of a chance for seal failures, jar breakage or for the product to spoil on the shelf.

If you have canned food in the past, your preparation for a new season may be routine. Make a quick survey of your supplies and purchase whatever is needed. Do you have enough jars to hold all your efforts? Are the jars free of cracks and nicks? Is your canner in good condition, and the canner seal ring free of cracks or tears? Have you remembered to purchase new lids for your canning jars? Are your spices fresh?

You might prefer to freeze your fruits and vegetables. Research and recommendations as to the best way to freeze and why you need to blanch vegetables have also been updated. Look for current information on the UNH Cooperative Extension website <http://extension.unh.edu/FoodSafe/FoodPreservation.htm>

Our ancestors had to preserve their food in order to have something to eat throughout the long, cold winter. They truly understood the concept of living off the land—it was their way of life. For most of us, preserving food is a choice not a necessity.

If you are new to food preservation or just want information and/or recipes on how to preserve food safely, contact your county Extension office or call the UNH Cooperative Extension Education Center at (877)398-4769. Trained volunteers can help you make sure that you have a great tasting and safe product to remember those long, lazy days of summer. Or join us at the Horse Meadow Senior Center in North Haverhill on Wednesday, August 11th for a free food preservation workshop at 5:30 pm. Call us at 787-6944 to register or for more information.