

Getting ready for home preservation season

By

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As the end of June looms, back yard gardeners and farmers alike are beginning to see the fruits (and vegetables) of their labor. Already we are enjoying locally grown spinach, lettuces, herbs and other greens, peas, and perhaps locally grown broccoli and cabbage. Asparagus season is over, and strawberries, thanks to a later season, may be around for a few more weeks. But as we go through July, we can look forward to blueberries, summer raspberries, green beans, beets, cucumbers, peppers, and the holy grail of fresh sweet corn and field tomatoes. So far the growing season has been blessed with sufficient rain and good weather, crops are happy and will likely be very productive.

So, now is the time to begin preparations for safe home food preservation, whether you have a garden or a favorite farm or farmers' market.

First, determine what method of home food preservation works best for you. Your choice may depend on your preference for the resulting product (frozen vs canned green beans, for example, are very different in taste and texture); your storage space; the tools or resources you have at your disposal (Canner? Pressure canner? Separate deep freezer? Refrigerator freezer only?); and, perhaps, the cost of the process. Since most folks think that preserving at home will save them money, a recent article from the University of Maine, *The Cost of Preserving Food in Maine* (<https://extension.umaine.edu/publications/4032e/>), might make a good read.

They looked only at the costs of energy (in Maine) and equipment used to preserve food as the cost of the food itself varies depending on where it is purchased. When freezing, the most expensive part of the equation is the freezer itself. After that, they factored in the cost of energy and the container, which in this case was a reusable container. One time use containers and freezer bags will add to costs. Freezing was estimated at 38 cents per pound of food.

The cost of pressure canning is \$1.14 per pound, while using a water bath canner will cost approximately 73 cents per pound. The difference here is the cost of the canner. A pressure canner is over three times the cost of a water bath canning pot when amortized over 20 years. (Using these figures and assuming the cost of a pound of fresh tomatoes is \$3.50, and 91% of the pound is useable, the cost of a pound of home canned tomatoes is approximately \$3.92. The cost of a pound of commercially canned tomatoes is about 92 cents.*)

Finally, dehydration is a rather costly operation in this part of the world at 99 cents per pound. You must use an electric dehydrator to be successful as the climate (some heat, more humidity) will not allow us to use the sun alone.

The differences may not seem significant unless you are putting away large quantities of food. I had always thought that freezing was the most expensive option. Not according to this study. The efficiency of modern freezers has probably changed this.

Once you decide which method you will use, then start gathering your supplies. As someone who likes to procrastinate, local sources can get depleted over the course of the summer season. Online sources are more reliable as it gets closer to September.

If freezing:

- If you need to purchase a freezer, keep in mind that a full freezer is more efficient. Buy only the space you need, do not overbuy. An upright is less efficient than a chest freezer, but I find it very easy to lose things in a deep chest freezer!
- If you own a freezer, eat what you can out of your freezer to make room for the new crop.
- Stock up on containers. Reusable are best. Make sure they are appropriate for the freezer. Some plastics will crack when frozen. Rigid containers stack more easily. If using freezer bags, again, make sure they are freezer and not simply food storage bags.
- A permanent marker and freezer tape or labels are essential as well.

If canning:

- Purchase a new or check the condition of your water bath canner. The water bath canner or large pot should be clean, have a lid, and a rack to hold the jars off the bottom. Be sure you can locate all the pieces and replace what might be missing.
- Purchase a new pressure canner or, if you already own one, keep in mind that a pressure canner with a dial gauge needs to be tested yearly. Have that done now. We do pressure gauge testing here at the office (diane.hirsch@uconn.edu) or call 203.407.3163. If you cannot make it here, you can send gauges to your canner manufacturer to be tested. That will take some time, so get it done as soon as possible. Be sure to check your gasket and other rubber parts to make sure they are not dried out or cracked. If they are, replace them. Make sure there is a rack to keep jars off the bottom of the canner.
- Check your supply of jars, lids and rings. The sealing compounds on lids can dry up and crack. Check the date on the box. If older than two or three years, it would be best to buy new. If jar rings are rusty, you should replace them. Check your jars. If the rims are chipped or cracked, replace with new. A chipped rim will prevent a good seal from forming.
- Find or replace your other tools: timers, spatulas, jar lifters, ladles, funnels, etc.

If dehydrating:

- Purchase or check on your dehydrator to make sure that it is working and that you have sufficient racks or screens.
- Purchase your storage equipment, whether it is freezer bags, canning jars or other air tight, food-safe containers.

Of course, when you get ready to can, freeze or dehydrate, be sure to make sure all of your equipment is cleaned with detergent and hot water prior to using. Follow instructions for preparing canning jars and lids.

Last, but not least, update your information regarding safe home food preservation. Check with the National Center for Home Food Preservation <http://nchfp.uga.edu/> . In addition to safe processing methods, they also have a blog that provides timely information and advice: <https://preservingfoodathome.com/>. The Ball Blue Book, generally recognized by Extension food safety professionals as safe, is updated regularly.

*Based on figures from USDA/ERS Fruit and Vegetable Prices, 2015