

My family and I have been enjoying the fresh produce our rather large garden has been turning out this summer. Our vines and plants are loaded and the vegetables are ripening at a fast rate. We eat what we can and are freezing or canning the rest. Puttin' by our surplus garden vegetables has become a common practice in my home.

The popularity of home canning and food preservation has gained momentum over the past few years. Some folks are coming back to the practice after a long absence, while others are just beginning to get their hands (literally) into it for the first time. Although my mom and dad were raised on farms where "puttin' by" was as common as grocery shopping, I was not raised learning that skill and had to rely on the food safety knowledge I gained in college coupled with these well-renowned home canning resources: *Ball Blue Book Guide to Preserving* (©2004), *So Easy to Preserve* (Cooperative Extension – The University of Georgia, ©2006) and the *Complete Guide to Home Canning* (USDA Bulletin No. 539, ©2009).

Canning offers you a safe way to preserve food at home, if done correctly. It can also help you significantly reduce your food costs – especially if you have access to the equipment needed for the process and use fruits and vegetables that are in season. Another benefit is that you can try a variety of recipes and determine which ones fit the tastes of you and your family. Finally, there can be a great sense of accomplishment and pride found in canning. It is a skill that allows you to provide safe food for your family and you know every ingredient that it contains.

Canning processes must follow safe food handling and preservation guidelines. In doing so, the oxygen and enzymes that contribute to food spoilage and the growth of botulinum bacteria (which leads to botulism – a deadly form of food poisoning) are removed. Additionally, the process prevents the growth of yeasts and molds, and helps form a high vacuum in the jars which keeps the liquid in and air and microorganisms out.

Getting Started: Determine the fresh foods you want to start with. Using one or more of the resources mentioned previously, research the process you should use in preserving those foods safely. This will help you determine what equipment you need. There are two accepted methods for canning foods: boiling water bath method and pressure-canned method.

High-acid foods, such as pickles, fruits, jellies and jams use the boiling water bath method which uses a large stockpot with a rack and lid. The stockpot needs to be tall enough for the water to cover the top of the filled jars by at least 1 inch.

Low-acid foods include vegetables that are not pickled and poultry or meats and must be pressure-canned. This requires equipment designed specifically for pressure canning. You cannot use a pressure cooker – they are not strong enough and do not have the capacity needed for safe pressure canning.

Both methods use mason-type jars that are specifically designed for home canning. Reusing glass jars, such as commercial mayonnaise jars, is not recommended. They may not seal and can break, especially in a pressure canner. Most canning jars sold today have two pieces – commonly called the flats and the rings. The flat metal disk (i.e. *flats*) has a sealing compound around the outer edge to cover the opening of the jars. The rings are screw bands that screw down tightly on the jar to fit over the flat and the mouth of the jar. Flats can only be used once but the rings can be used over and over, unless they are bent or become rusted.

Keep It Fresh: Next, choose fruits and vegetables that are ripe, fresh, and of high quality. Many vegetables lose some of their nutritive value as soon as they are picked and can lose as much as half their vitamins within a few days unless the vegetable has been refrigerated or preserved. By growing your own vegetables or purchasing from local farmers/gardeners, you are more assured of the freshness. If necessary, you can keep the vegetables refrigerated for a few days until you have time to get them canned but try to keep the “holding time” to a minimum.

Once you have determined the food you want to preserve and researched the method needed to process it, select a proven recipe designed for home canning. There are recipes found in the three resources provided previously in this article as well as online. The University of Georgia’s Cooperative Extension Service is the home to the National Center for Home Food Preservation and provides a wealth of great information about canning and freezing foods at home on their website at:

<http://nchfp.uga.edu/>. Additionally, they have a webinar on their homepage to help you get started, as well.

As you roll up your sleeves to get started, Karen Blakeslee, food science extension associate for K-State Research and Extension and coordinator of the Rapid Response Center at KSU reminds us of these important steps:

- Wash your hands before handling food.
- Start with a clean kitchen.
- Make sure food is washed well before you can it or freeze it.
- Make sure equipment, including the jars you plan to use, is washed and clean. Check jars for cracks and scratches to prevent breaking that could occur during the canning process or later on in storage.
- Use the right canning procedures and equipment based on what foods you plan to preserve.

Call me with your canning questions at the Geary County Extension office, 238-4161. Our office also has a wealth of information about home preservation. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!