

Daily Union Article

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Vol 3 Issue 30: Oh, Just Can It! –Food Preservation Basics Part 2

Even though tomatoes had a rough start in history, they are now a staple to many homes in the United States. We are second only to China in our annual production of tomatoes. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), fresh and processed tomatoes account for more than \$2 billion in annual farm cash receipts. They are in all 50 states with 20 states producing them through large scale commercial operations. They are also a standby for many container gardens or large yard gardens for direct use by American families. It seems that a garden's production of tomatoes goes from limited to limitless in a very short amount of time.

The storage life of fresh tomatoes is relatively short leading to the need for preserving them for year-round enjoyment. Home food preservation, such as canning or freezing, are common preservation methods used for this purpose.

Families that find themselves with a bountiful tomato crop need to be aware of safe canning and freezing practices to ensure the end product is free of potentially unsafe products and/or microorganisms. Heat processing will destroy these harmful microorganisms while freezing will prevent the growth of them.

The most important step to home preservation is to follow the recommended processing guidelines provided by the Home Canning Association and other reliable sources such as USDA's Complete Guide to Home Canning. Both of these resources are linked on the Geary County K-State Research and Extension website at:
<http://www.geary.k-state.edu/home-family/food-preservation.html>.

These guidelines are based on a large number of research studies that identify and affirm safe home canning practices to ensure the health of those who consume the product. For example, the canning processing times are dependent on several factors: 1) the main product being canned, 2) the type(s) of ingredients being added to the main product being canned, and 3) the altitude at which the food is being processed. See Chart A. (The altitude of Geary County is 1,100 feet above sea level.)

Changes in the amount or type of ingredients will change the acidity, consistency, and density of the final product and could create a product that is harmful for consumption. As a result of new research and changes in tomato varieties, recommendations have changed over the years. Using "Grandma's recipe" is a cause for concern. Only research-based instructions and recipes from the two publications mentioned above should be used in today's home canning practices.

Safe home preservation begins with selecting and preparing the equipment to be used. Depending on the desired end product, tomatoes can be processed in either a boiling water canner or a pressure canner.

Boiling Water Canner: Select a pot deep enough for boiling water to cover the tops of the jars by 1 or 2 inches. It will need to have a rack to keep the jars off the bottom of pot as well as a tight fitting lid.

Pressure Canner: These can be purchased in a variety of sizes. In order to be safe for processing, however, it needs to be large enough to hold at least four quart jars. The use of a pressure canner with a dial gauge is recommended to get an accurate reading of the amount of pressure inside the canner during processing. A pressure gauge can lose calibration from being dropped and/or through repeated use. Bring the lid with gauge into the Geary County K-State Research and Extension office to have it checked for accuracy. Pressure canners with a weighted gauge do not provide a specific pressure reading. They also cannot be adjusted precisely for higher altitudes. This could result in overprocessing the food product.

Note: Pressure saucepans are no longer considered safe to use for canning.

Canner Care: Before each use, inspect the canner. It is important to make sure the steam vent and safety valve are not blocked. These can be cleaned with a pipe cleaner. If the canner has a gasket, make sure it fits tightly in the groove in the lid. If it fits loosely, it will need replaced. See Chart B.

Once these preliminary steps are taken, finding a researched recipe to use is the next step. Provided is a recipe for basic stewed tomatoes. These are great to use by themselves or as a base in soups, stews, or chili, just to mention a few of the many uses.

Stewed Tomatoes

2 quarts chopped tomatoes
¼ cup chopped green peppers
¼ cup chopped onions
2 teaspoons celery salt
2 teaspoons sugar
¼ teaspoon salt

Yield: About 3 pints

Procedure: Combine all ingredients. Cover and cook 10 minutes, stirring occasionally to prevent sticking.

Pour hot mixture into hot jars, leaving ½ inch headspace. Remove air bubbles. Wipe jar rims. Adjust lids, and process in a pressure canner: 15 minutes for pints and 20 minutes for quarts (10 pounds of pressure with a weighted gauge; 11 pounds of pressure with a dial gauge). Adjust pressure for altitude. *This recipe was extracted from "Canning Tomatoes and Tomato Products," Pacific Northwest Extension Publication PNW300, April 2015.*

Enjoy the bounty of gardening throughout the year through home food preservation. For more information about canning, canning safety, and researched canning recipes, contact me at the Geary County K-State Research and Extension at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!