



Review the Basics For a Safe Food Preservation Season

Preserving food at home can be a gratifying activity for individuals young and old. But have you ever wondered how your home canning practices would rate? Well, now we have the answer. The National Center for Home Food Preservation, located at the University of Georgia, recently conducted a nationwide telephone survey of 501 households to gather information on home food preservation activities. Some rather surprising results were obtained, for instance:

- A large number of households nationwide (27 percent) reported canning food at home in 1999.
- And, where did they receive their canning information? Forty-eight percent obtained their canning instructions from friends or relatives while 19 percent consulted cookbooks for the purpose.
- And, did they follow the directions? Sixty-seven percent reported using their home-canning instructions "as is," while 29 percent adapted them for use.

These results are both a cause for celebration and concern, says Barbara Ingham, Extension food scientist of University of Wisconsin-Extension. "I am delighted that so many people are carrying on the tradition of home canning," says Dr. Ingham. "In Wisconsin, we are seeing a resurgence of grandparents and grandchildren canning together and this can be a wonderful way to create memories." But, what concerns Dr. Ingham is the validity of the recipes that these home canners are using.

"There are several sources of research-tested recipes for home canners in Wisconsin, the Safe Food Preservation Series of bulletins, the USDA Complete Guide to Home Canning, available online, and the Ball Blue Book, 1997 edition," says Ingham. Friends, relatives and cookbooks may not be reliable when it comes to sources of research-tested recipes.

And there is further cause for concern. The University of Georgia survey revealed that:

- A number of households (up to 30 percent) reported using a pressure cooker for canning.
- And a rather high percentage (21 percent) used the "open-kettle" method (no processing after filling) for processing tomatoes, and 3 percent reported using the oven as a "canning" method.
- Of particular concern are the 39 percent who reported using a boiling water canner for processing vegetables such as green beans and carrots.

"Many people are using methods putting them at high risk for food-borne illness from home-canned vegetables, including botulism," says Ingham. The USDA recommends a pressure canner, not a pressure cooker, for home canning. Pressure cookers can be used for canning *only* if they hold at least six quarts and if they contain a weighted or dial gauge that allows for processing at up to 25 pounds of pressure. Furthermore, low-acids foods such as vegetables and meat must be canned in a pressure canner in order to ensure safety.

Methods such as 'open kettle' and 'oven' canning are particularly unsafe. Ingham stresses the importance of using research-tested recipes, especially when sharing ideas with children or friends new to home canning. "Research gathered over the past several years has led us to change recommendations and recipes for home canning. It is very important that individuals update their recipe files, or an unsafe product may result," says Ingham.

In Wisconsin, the Safe Food Preservation Series of publications has recently been updated to reflect the new research guidelines.

So, let's review the basics before starting another season of home food preservation. Start with a tested recipe. Sources of tested recipes include bulletins in the Wisconsin Safe Food Preservation Series by Barbara Ingham: Canning Fruits Safely (B0430), Canning Meat, Wild Game, Poultry and Fish Safely (B3345), Canning Salsa Safely (B3570), Canning Vegetables Safely (B1159), Freezing Fruits and Vegetables (B3278), Home-made Pickles and Relishes (B2267), Making Jams, Jellies and Fruit Preserves (B2909), and Tomatoes Tart and Tasty (B2605). The publications are available from your county UW-Extension office, from Cooperative Extension Publications (877-947-7827), or online at <http://cecommerce.uwex.edu>. There may be a fee for the publications, which are printable online.

Assemble the equipment that you will need. If you can both high- and low-acid foods, then you will need at least a pressure canner, and most people have a boiling water canner too. Meats and vegetables are low-acid foods and must be canned in a pressure canner, while fruits, jams and jellies, and pickles are high in acid and can be canned in a boiling water canner. Your canner must be fitted with a rack to hold the jars off the bottom of the canner. Any large pot with a tight-fitting lid and rack can serve as a boiling water canner.

Pressure canners come in two types, dial gauge and weighted gauge. Dial gauge canners should be checked each year for accuracy. Your local county UW-Extension office should be able to help calibrate your canner gauge. Inspect your supply of jars and lids. Home canning jars should be free of cracks, scratches and nicks. Replace jars that are damaged. Use standard two-piece lids for home canning; purchasing a new supply of lids each year. If you choose to freeze or dry produce items, locate the proper packaging materials for those items.

Choose or harvest produce at the proper stage of maturity. If you have your own garden, pick produce at the proper stage of maturity. Don't pick under-ripe fruit or immature vegetables, unless your recipe calls for those. The quality of fruits and vegetables does not improve after harvest. It's better to hold some fruits for a day or two in the refrigerator as you wait for other fruits to ripen, rather than picking fruit that isn't ready yet. The same holds for vegetables that are not yet mature. Carefully inspect all fruits and vegetables, and discard those that are obviously diseased. Small blemishes can be trimmed away, but it may be unsafe to can diseased produce.

For more information about preservation, visit <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pubs> and refer to publication B2718, "Safe Canning Methods".

Kristi Cutts, Family Living Educator
UW-Extension, Winnebago County
625 E. County Rd. Y, Suite 600
Oshkosh WI 54901

Telephone: (920) 232-1973
e-mail: kristi.cutts@ces.uwex.edu
Website: www.uwex.edu/ces/cty/winnebago/
Publications: <http://http://learningstore.uwex.edu/>



An EEO/Affirmative Action employer, University of Wisconsin Extension provides equal opportunities in employment and programming including Title IX requirements. Please make request for reasonable accommodations to ensure equal access to educational programs as early as possible preceding the scheduled program, service or activity.