

THE ZEN of FOOD PRESERVATION

Julie Rawson, lifelong food processor

When you are making plans to set up housekeeping with someone for the long haul, it is good to know what you have in common. In our case Jack and I, as it turned out, both thought it was important to center our lives around children, giving them meaningful work to do, and to live frugally. Along with our old beat up cars and no mortgage, we hold the preservation of food for later use as a high priority on our homestead.

Now, rather shamefacedly after our children are all out of the house, we can be seen sneaking into the local natural foods store in March and April to buy a few things that we have run out of. But, we have a certain sense of gloat and good Protestant holier than thou-ism when we can eat almost all of our food from our root cellar, freezers, canning jars, dried storage jars, and baskets of stored alliums. So how does one do all this? The trick is to do it as you go along, kind of like making the bed and washing the dishes.

Let's assume for a minute that you have access to your own big garden, or a large CSA share, or a local orchard when fruit is in season, or a farmer's market where you have made an arrangement with a local farmer to save you some less than first quality produce. Now the excuses have all been dealt with, the "oh, I don't have any space" argument. Get a chest freezer and use it as a piece of furniture/table top. And you can store your canning jars under your bed if necessary. Really, where there is a will, there is a way.

As soon as I could sit up to the table I was frenching green beans, peeling apples for applesauce, pitting cherries, cutting corn off of cobs, popping skins off of tomatoes for canning, you name it. You could say that it is in my blood. Since we've been with Jack, we have branched out to more exotic food preservation than the usual canning and freezing to wine making, lacto-fermenting, dehydrating, making cheese and yogurt, and also perfected really low tech techniques such as root cellaring and storing squashes in bushels and alliums in braids.

It is important to demystify food preservation. It isn't that hard to do. And if you fail, you can always try again. Just do what ever it is in small batches until you are sure of your technique. And also remember not to make large quantities of things that you will never eat (unless you want to unload your wares on unsuspecting relatives at Christmas). Remember always to taste whatever you are making, to make sure right away that it has an enjoyable flavor.

Let's start with something easy and freeze a few items. We have a wood cookstove, so the first thing we do is to crank it up nice and hot and put on our 6 quart copper bottom, Revereware stainless steel pot with about a half inch of water to boil (about a quart). When it is boiling royally, I add about 4 to 5 quarts of the vegetable of choice to the pot and put it back on to boil.

When it comes back to a boil begin timing. Boil for the specified amount of time and remove immediately, pour it into a colander to drain the water, and then immerse the colander of vegetables in a sink full of cold water. Swish it around until the vegetables are cool, pack them in your favorite storage bags, and put them in the freezer, all as separate as possible, so that they can freeze as quickly as possible.

Here are my favorite times for favorite frozen vegetables (count time from when the water comes back to a boil):

Spinach: 1 minute

Peas, snap peas, snow peas, chard, kale, collards & Asian greens: 2 minutes

Green beans, broccoli & cabbage: 3 minutes

Cauliflower: 4 minutes

Corn (cut off the cob first): 6 minutes

Some special cases are:

Peppers: slice them as you would like to use them and pack them in bags - no cooking necessary

Berries: pack them in bags - no processing

Fresh herbs: pull the leaves off and pack tightly in plastic bags and freeze - no blanching

Summer squash/zucchini: bring water to a boil, boil the squash for 3 minutes, strain and run through a food processor. Freeze in pint or quart containers to add later to soup to thicken the stock

Green soybeans: boil the pods for 3 minutes then cool in cold water, then pop the soybeans out and freeze in bags

Applesauce: cut up apples skin and all, and do some minimal coring and removal of bad flesh; add 1 quart of water to a 5 gallon pot of apples and slowly simmer them on the stove until they are mushy. Run them through a Foley food mill, then add cinnamon as desired and pack in pint or quart containers and freeze

Freezer jam: cook down 8 cups of fruit with one cup sweetener, when it comes to a boil, add approximately 1 T of agar powder (experiment until you get the consistency you like) slowly and stir for 5 minutes (it will want to clump up, so be careful). Cool, and pack in appropriate sized containers and freeze. Keep for up to three weeks in the refrigerator once you have opened it

	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	Refrigerate in: ■ Plastic □ Ventilated Plastic	Freeze-unblanched	Freeze-blanched	Pickle/Can/Jam	Dry-air or dryer	Root Cellar-32°-40° moist, dark	Dry Store-55° dark	Juice	Wine
Apples			■	■	■	■	■	□	Sauced	Sauced	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Asparagus	■	■						■	3 min							
Beets			■	■	■	■	■	□		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Berries		■	■	■	■	■	■	□ unwashed	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
Broccoli			■	■	■	■	■	■	3 min		✓			✓	✓	✓
Brussel Sprouts						■	■	■	3-5 min			✓				
Cabbage		■	■	■	■	■	■	□	3 min	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
Carrots		■	■	■	■	■	■	□			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Cauliflower		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	4 min							
Celery			■	■	■	■	■	■				✓		✓	✓	✓
Cherries								□	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓
Corn, sweet			■	■	■	■	■	■	6-8 min		✓					
Corn, dry								■	✓		✓		✓			
Cucumbers		■	■	■	■	■	■	□		✓			✓			
Eggplant			■	■	■	■	■	■			✓					
Garlic			■	■	■	■	■	■		✓	✓		✓			
Green Beans			■	■	■	■	■	■	3 min	✓	✓					
Greens	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	2-3 min						✓	✓
Herbs	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓
Leeks			■	■	■	■	■	□	✓		✓	✓				
Lettuce	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■						✓	✓	✓
Melons			■	■	■	■	■	□ when ripe						✓	✓	✓
Mushrooms	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■		✓	✓					
Onions			■	■	■	■	■	■			✓		✓			
Parsnips								□					✓			
Peaches			■	■	■	■	■	□ when ripe	✓	Sauced	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Pears			■	■	■	■	■	□ when ripe	✓	Sauced	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Peas		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	2-3 min	✓						
Peppers			■	■	■	■	■	■	✓		✓					
Plums			■	■	■	■	■	□	Sauced	✓				✓	✓	✓
Potatoes			■	■	■	■	■	□				✓				
Rhubarb	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	Sauced							✓
Rutabagas								□				✓				
Spinach	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	1-2 min					✓	✓	✓
Summer Squash		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	2-3 min		✓					
Winter Squash			■	■	■	■	■	■	4-6 min				✓			
Tomatoes		■	■	■	■	■	■	□	✓	Sauced	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Turnips	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	□				✓				

The single most comprehensive book on food preservation is *Stocking Up* by Carol Huppung. One of the oldest, most reliable and nutrient enhancing preservation methods is lacto-fermentation, as described by Sally Fallon in *Nourishing Traditions*. Both books are available at many public libraries and in paperback from most booksellers. Further reading might include books on herbs, root-cellars, solar drying, wine making and juicing. The best way to learn food preservation is by doing. See our list of practical skills workshops at www.nofamass.org or offer to help an expert on a hot August day, at the peak of harvest season.

Note: "Blanching" refers to cooking briefly in boiling water. To blanch vegetables, bring just enough water to cover them to a boil, and then add the chopped vegetables. When the water returns to a boil, start timing. After boiling, dunk them briefly in cold water and cool thoroughly before freezing.

Canning: I have never used a pressure canner so won't discuss how to use it. My favorite things to can are peaches, pears, tomatoes, and juices like grape and tomato.

Bring a large pot that is deep enough to handle a quart jar or three or seven to a boil. Remember that the jars will displace a fair amount of water, so learn how full to fill it so that when the jars are all in the water they will be covered by an inch of water. And the jar of fruit or vegetable in question to the boiling water. When it resumes boiling count the "canning time" from this point. Remove from the water and wait for the lids to pop down (it is a great noise). Unscrew the rings and store with lids only. When you go to eat your product, make sure the lid hasn't loosened up. If it has, feed the contents to the chickens.

- **Peaches:** cover a pot of peaches in boiling water and let sit for 5-10 minutes. Slip the skins off with a knife, cut them in quarters, and pack in clean quart jars. Make a syrup of water with maple syrup or sucanat and fill to within 1/2 inch of the top. Put on new lids, and screw on the rings, medium tight. Can for 10 minutes.
- **Pears:** skin the pears with a knife and pack in jars. Make a syrup with as much sweetener as you desire, pack as with peaches and can for 15 minutes
- **Tomatoes:** There are as many ways to can tomatoes as there are gardeners. This is how I do it. I cut up tomatoes, take out cores and bad spots and cook with some good Celtic sea salt until they are boiled down to favored consistency. Pour the tomatoes into jars leaving 1/2 inch head space and put on lids. Process for 15 minutes.
- **Tomato juice:** After cooking down the tomatoes, run them through a Foley food mill and pour the juice into jars and process 15 minutes.
- **Grape juice:** I don't like to make too much of this, because it seems to need so much sweetener to be palatable. Take grapes off of stems and simmer slowly (they will make their own juice without additional water) until the juice is separated. Run them through that Foley food mill again, and add sweetener to taste, process for 10 minutes.

A great resource for canning and freezing is
Rodale Press' *Stocking Up*



Lacto-fermentation: Here is a very old technology that has made an incredible revival due in large part to the work of one woman, Sally Fallon. Her wonderful book, *Nourishing Traditions*, is a must read. She has a million recipes, but here is a simple one for sauerkraut that I got from Peter Young, an early lacto-fermenter. Eat a couple tablespoons of sauerkraut for the rest of your life and you will have a very long and very healthy life. For every lb. of finely shredded cabbage, add one t of Celtic Sea salt. Let them sit for an hour of so in a bowl. Pack the kraut in quart jars and share the brine around. You will need to add a little more water to each jar, and a little more salt (the amount will vary according to your taste. Screw on plastic Ball lids medium tight (the metal ones will rust) and leave the kraut on your kitchen counter for three days. Then take it to your root cellar or a cool basement to keep the lacto-fermentation process going. If your storage area is cool enough you can keep this sauerkraut around as long as a year and a half. You can break into your sauerkraut after 5 days. If you don't have a cool storage area, you can keep it in the refrigerator, the lacto-fermentation process will essentially stop. Sauerkraut is better made in October or November when it is cooler.

Air drying: I use this method mostly for herbs like parsley, marjoram, mint, oregano. Pick and rubber band a bunch of your favorite herbs and hang upside down out of the sun in a warm, dry place. After about two weeks, on a non-humid day, you can take the herbs down, separate the leaves from the stems and put them into jars with a lid. Store them in the dark in a dry location.

Butter: If you are lucky enough to have a cow, or get raw milk from a neighbor, let it stand over night in the frig, then skim off the cream. Let it sit out on the counter for about an hour, and then pour it into a food processor (not too much at a time as it will splash out). Next, process the milk for an amazingly short time, until you see the milk splashing around in there with some great looking yellow stuff. Pour the buttermilk and butter into a colander that is sitting in a bowl, and then remove the butter to a bowl of its own. Add some of that great salt and mix it in with your hands. More buttermilk will separate. Put the butter out on a piece of wax paper, form into any shape you like, wrap it up and freeze it for later use, or use it right away.

Celtic Sea Salt: Peter Young turned me onto this when I first learned how to lacto-ferment from him. You can order it from the Grain and Salt Society at 1-800-topsalt. I get 5 pounds of light grey at a time and it costs \$28 or so for that much. It is chunky and is great like that or you can buy a salt grinder from them if you like it finer. It has a nice array of trace minerals and has a sweet taste. It is immensely healthful. I use no other salt.

Root Cellaring of carrots, apples, beets, potatoes: Go out and get Nancy Bubel's book "Root Cellaring" and build your own or retrofit one. We store potatoes and apples in bushels on shelves, and carrots and beets in wet sand on the floor in bushels. We use them all winter until late April.

"We bought our Excalibur Food Dehydrator almost 20 years ago. In it we make dried peaches, pears, cherry tomatoes, garlic powder and fruit leather. For the fruit leather and garlic powder, they offer special reusable sheets to lay in on the screened shelves."

- Fruit leather - Make a puree of your favorite fruit in the blender. Add honey to taste. Pour out on the sheets and spread with a spatula. Dry in the dehydrator. When the leather is "done" roll it up and store in a jar or plastic bag. These homemade fruit roll ups will be a favorite of your kid who doesn't mind being a "little different" when it comes to snack time at school.
- Garlic powder - We raise 600 lbs of garlic on our farm so throwing a little into garlic powder is not a big deal. Peel the garlic and blend it in the blender until it is paste. Pour/spread it on the non-stick sheets and dry in the dehydrator. When it is done, grind it in a simple coffee grinder. Store in glass jars. This is potent stuff.

Excalibur dehydrators are available at www.VitalityPlus1.com

Braids of onions, shallots, garlic: the best way to store these alliums is in braids because they get good air circulation that way. French braid this family with a twine string to keep the braid sturdy as the stalks die back. Store them in 50-55 degrees out of the sun - not in a damp place. If you can't braid them, you can store these folks in baskets, checking them regularly for rot.

Have a good time with your food preservation exploits. Bring your stuff out and brag regularly to anyone who will listen. Feel comfy; satisfied and well-fed from food you have wrought.

