

What to do with your summer bounty of fruits and vegetables?

The growing season is fast coming to a close here in northern Wyoming. If you're lucky you have a garden full of fresh produce that needs to be harvested. Are you going to be able to eat it all while it's fresh, or will you be storing some to eat over the winter? If you are planning on storing your food for an extended period of time there are a few methods of food preservation that you can utilize. Here I will present some of the major methods of food preservation as well as their relative strengths and weaknesses.

Freezing may be the simplest method of home food preservation. Many foods can be directly frozen without the major preparatory work required in other methods of preservation. However, some foods (including most vegetables) do require a brief, partial cooking called 'blanching' prior to freezing. This step stops enzyme actions that can cause the loss of color, flavor, and texture during freezer storage. While the blanching process does cause some nutrient loss, frozen foods will generally retain more nutrients than their canned or dried counterparts. However, freezing does have a drawback: the energy used in lowering and maintaining a foods' temperature at freezing make it the costliest method of food preservation.

Canning is definitely the most labor-intensive method for preserving food. While less costly than freezing, there is still some fuel usage in the canning process and start-up costs can be considerable. However, if you take care of your equipment and don't give too many jars away your initial purchases should last you a long time. This makes home canning relatively economical (if you don't count your personal labor), and nutrient retention of canned food isn't too far behind that of frozen food. Proper storage in a cool dark pantry can help to discourage further nutrient loss.

Drying is probably the oldest method of food preservation, dating back to the sun-drying of foods as early as 12,000 B.C. While drying is the most time-intensive method, your dehydrator is doing the work the majority of that time. Dried foods are lightweight and shelf-stable, making them ideal for backpacking or camping trips. Drying falls in between freezing and canning in terms of personal labor expended, but is usually inferior to these methods in nutrient retention. Ultimately it is up to you to determine your preferred method of food preservation. Hopefully these tips help you to make an informed decision. All of these processes can be accomplished easily and safely from your own home. However, you must make sure you are following tested recipes explicitly to ensure the safety and quality of your final product. Tested and reliable food preservation tips, along with links to other reliable websites, may be found on the UW Cooperative Extension Service's food preservation website:

http://uwacadweb.uwyo.edu/cesnutrition/Food_Preservation.htm