

Safe Preserving: Time-Saving Tips

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Image courtesy of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

If you are like me, the summer is a time when you have two full-time jobs. One of my jobs is as a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the other is as a gardener and food processor. At nights and on the weekends, I am either working in the garden or processing the bounty of the harvest. Here are a few quick tips to try and help you manage all the work that goes into keeping up with the bounty of the summer:

1. Gather, and test, equipment as early in the season as possible. You don't want to find yourself with a pressure canner that doesn't work when the canner is on the stove full of pint jars of green bean. [I always advocate starting the season by canning....water! You don't even need to use jars.

Place ~3 inches of water in your pressure canner, seal the canner, and place the canner on the stove over high heat. Make sure the canner vents properly. Once vented (for 10 minutes), seal the vent port, and make sure the canner comes up to pressure. Once up to pressure, turn off the heat and allow the canner to cool. This whole process will take about 30 minutes and can save a lot of headaches later.] Check with your local University of Wisconsin-Extension county office to have your dial-gauge pressure canner tested before use, and for answers to your home canning questions. The UW-Extension office is also a great place to learn about guidelines for use of the new steam canner and for research-tested recipes for boiling water and pressure canning. UW-Extension recommends standard home-canning jars and 2-piece lids for canning. Lids should be stored in a cool, dry location and used within 3 years of purchase.

2. Break a job into smaller tasks. Sometimes the preparation work takes most of the day. Chopping or dicing vegetables or fruits for salsas or relish, trimming green beans for canning, peeling and quartering tomatoes – all of these tasks can take time, especially if you have a bountiful harvest. Since I usually hot-pack product, I tend to reserve one day (usually Saturday) for food preparation, and then do my canning on Sunday or on week-day evenings. So, on Saturday, I may harvest the last of the ripe tomatoes, and bring them inside and add them to the others that have accumulated over the week. I like to can Crushed, hot pack tomatoes so I sort the tomatoes, dip them in water so that I can slip off the skins, and either stop there, or quarter them and stew them up. I refrigerate the prepared tomatoes overnight. On Sunday, I heat the crushed tomatoes to a boil, boil gently and can. This same process works great for pickle and relish recipes that are hot-packed. For instance, on a recent Saturday I prepared diced vegetables for zesty zucchini relish and placed the salted vegetables in the refrigerator. Then on Monday night after work all I had to do was drain the vegetables, heat them in a vinegar brine, and can! The vegetables were held for a day longer than necessary, but this is safe as long as they are kept refrigerated.

3. Process the most perishable items first. Some items are so perishable that they just can't wait to be processed. The best examples are corn, sweet peas, and cucumbers. Each of these items will lose quality rapidly once harvested. So, if your aim is high quality canned product, don't delay. Consider

planning your work so that you move from the garden (or farm market) into the kitchen and process these products without delay.

4. Consider various methods of preservation. Depending on your volume and the amount of storage space you have available, you may wish to preserve the bounty of your harvest using several different methods. For instance, I plan on canning most of my tomatoes; the ones that exceed our ability to eat fresh. But, sometimes there is another part of the harvest that won't make a canner load. These tomatoes I might dehydrate, stew-up and freeze, or roast in the oven with coarse salt and olive oil and freeze to add to pasta or pizza. Having a variety of food preservation methods available will add variety to your family's meals.

5. Take time to savor the season. With the rush to preserve the quality of the harvest, we may forget to take the time to actually enjoy the bounty of Wisconsin in the summer. So, be sure to take some time to relax and sit down with a plate of perfectly ripe tomatoes. It's a memory that you'll want to return to in the dead of winter!

Safe preserving,

Barb

