

Preserving your Food – Jams, chutneys, drying and bottling

Food for thought

Not so long ago it was common practice for people to preserve lots of food, using a variety of techniques from bottling to jam and chutney making. The convenience of more pre-prepared / value added food in shops and supermarkets, as well as fruit and vegetables being readily available out of season, has perhaps led us as a society away from DIY food.

However, there seems to be something of a resurgence in home made produce, and there are lots of great reasons to give it a go. For one thing it can be great fun, and give rise to lots of opportunities for family activities (e.g. visiting a fruit farm to gather fruit to make jam, or watering the tomatoes in the greenhouse and helping to make them into chutney). Preserving your own food is also empowering. You can make your jams and sauces just how you like them, to that they are just as sweet, sour, salty or spicy as suits your taste. You can also choose your ingredients according to your own set of ethical choices, so your food can be low in food miles, fair trade, organic or pesticide free. If you are able to preserve excess food, for example your garden glut of tomatoes, or your colleague's wind fall apples (or even shop bought goods when they're in season and cheaper or simply of reduced price) you can enjoy these foods throughout the year, and reduce the amount of food that needs to be wasted. These home made products can be used in place of shop bought goods, and help to save some money too. They also make great gifts!

Top tips

You will need to strike a balance between changing what you cook and eat to the sorts of goods that you can make, and making the sorts of home produce that you are more likely to eat. It may take a while to get this right!

Don't pick more fruit than you can process – it leads to wastage

Take bags and tubs with you when you go out for a walk, in case you find some good berries!

Keep your jars together with their lids both in storage and while cleaning and sterilising prior to use. Some jars may have lids of similar size to others but may not make such a great seal as with their original lid.

Using Certo or preserving sugar to add in extra pectin can dramatically speed up jam making time – often a godsend if you are doing this in the evening, and you want to get to bed!!

A Simple how-to:

There follows a brief description and simple guide to the following methods for home preserving: Jam, chutney, drying and bottling. You will need to find recipes to follow to get started; however there are a great many books on the topic and online references where you will find a range of recipes.

For both jam and chutney, a stainless steel pan that is large enough to contain all the

ingredients is essential. If you become keen it may be well worth investing in a preserving pan. Brass, copper or iron pans should not be used as they react with the vinegar and give a metallic flavour to the chutney. Aluminium also reacts with acidic fruit and may pose a health risk as it builds up in the brain. Stainless steel pans are best for jam making.

Jam

Making jam is the ideal way to preserve the taste and nutritional value of summer fruits so that they can be enjoyed throughout the year

Jam contains two essential ingredients; fruit (which provides pectin) and sugar (which preserves the fruit.)

Pectin is important to the jam's set: low-pectin fruits like strawberries need extra pectin (in the form of lemon juice, liquid pectin such as "certo" or pectin-enriched preserving sugar) to reach a spreadable consistency.

When choosing fruit, select pieces that are perfectly ripe and unblemished – they'll have the best levels of pectin and the finest flavour. If the fruit needs washing, make sure you dry it thoroughly, because excess water can prevent the jam from setting or cause mould on the finished jam.

The most important thing to remember is that the pan, spoon, and jars used must be scrupulously clean to prevent bacteria from getting into the jam and spoiling it. Making jam with 1 - 2kg of fruit at a time is ideal - more than that and it is difficult to get the jam to set because it cannot be boiled fast enough. 2kg of fruit is enough to fill 6 standard sized 450g jam jars.

The fruit should be placed in the pan and simmered in a pan for around half an hour – this helps to draw out the pectin. The sugar can be added at this point (often equal the weight of the fruit) or some recipes will suggest adding earlier as sugar hardens fruit. For example, if you are making jam from soft fruits such as strawberries, you should mix the fruit with sugar from the start as this will help prevent the fruit from disintegrating when heated.

Any froth/scum which accumulates on the surface of the mixture can be skimmed off carefully while boiling. Some recipes suggest adding a knob of butter to the pan of jam to reduce the scum.

To determine if your jam is ready to take off the heat and put into jars, you will need to test for set. There are a number of ways to do this, but the simplest is by using a cold saucer and teaspoon. Use a teaspoon to put a small amount of jam onto the saucer. Leave it for a few seconds and then push the jam with your finger. It will wrinkle on the surface when the jam is ready. If not, try again in a minute or two with a fresh saucer. The other way to test for set is the temperature test. The jam is ready when the temperature registers 105°C (221°F) on a sugar thermometer. Simply immerse the thermometer in the jam shortly before the specified cooking time is completed, keeping it away from the base and the sides of the pan. Leave in position until the temperature has been reached. Boil a little longer if necessary.

When your jam is set, turn off the heat and prepare some sterilised jam jars. To sterilise

first clean them in soapy water, then you can either use a sterilising solution such as dissolved campden tablets or VWP powder, or place your jars into a moderate oven for 10 minutes.

Pour the finished jam into jars using a sterilised funnel or large spoon. It may help to seal your jam by adding a waxed paper disk at this point, before sealing with the lid.

Cool the jars at room temperature, and wipe clean before labelling.

Chutney

Chutneys originated in India – the name derived from the Hindu word chatni – but are now a very popular preserve all over the world. They are made from fruits or vegetables, or a mixture of the two, which are chopped, cooked, mixed with spices, vinegar and other ingredients and reduced to a smooth pulp.

Favourite fruit chutneys include spicy apple (perfect for eating with crackers and cheddar), mango or apricot (a great accompaniment to Indian foods), and the old-fashioned marrow jam (great in a sandwich). You might also wish to try green tomato chutney and plum chutney – both fruits are easily available in-season. Homemade chutney is a wonderful Christmas gift (perfect for eating with cold cuts) so make lots when the ingredients are cheap.

The scope of chutneys is endless and the combinations and permutations can be varied according to personal taste and the ingredients available. They can be sweet, sour, hot or mild. Once you've mastered the basics of making chutney, and picked up a few traditional recipes, you can play around to create a classic recipe of your own.

Unlike jam making, windfall apples, green tomatoes and other end-of-season fruit such as rhubarb can be used as there is no worry about the setting qualities. Dried fruit such as raisins, dates, and sultanas are commonly used.

A big advantage to both fruit and vegetable chutneys is that they improve with age and, if properly stored, will remain in good condition for years.

The sugar and vinegar usually balance one another out – you'll note that most recipes include numerically equal amounts (100g sugar to 100ml vinegar) – to achieve that characteristic sweet and sour chutney flavour. Generally whole spices are preferable in chutney-making than ground ones which can give a muddy appearance to the chutney. Bruise these and tie them up in a muslin bag and cook with the other ingredients. However, some recipes call for a mixture of both whole and ground spices to give the best flavour.

When is it ready? Unlike jam, you don't test for a set when making chutney. It is ready when, if you draw a wooden spoon across the pan, a channel is left for a moment before the chutney refills the space. Don't forget that in its warm state, the chutney is a lot more fluid than it will be after cooling.

The success of a good chutney is that it should be relatively smooth in texture and have a rich mellow flavour. To achieve this it requires long, slow cooking and then, ideally, it should be left to mature for at least three months.

Drying

Drying is a method of food preservation that works by removing water from the food, which prevents the growth of micro-organisms and decay. Drying food using the sun and wind to prevent spoilage has been known since ancient times. We all probably use dried food, without thinking about it, such as dried herbs, raisins, soup mixes, pasta and noodles. Drying will never replace canning / bottling and freezing because these methods do a better job of retaining the taste and appearance of fresh food. But drying is an excellent way to preserve foods that can add variety to meals and provide delicious, nutritious snacks such as fruit leathers. One of the biggest advantages of dried foods is that they take much less storage space than canned / bottled or frozen foods. Another advantage is that once dry, you have no on-going electricity costs in keeping your fruit and vegetables preserved as with storing in a freezer. It is thought that dried foods can maintain more of their nutritional value than frozen or canned / bottled foods.

You can dry fruit such as plums (to give prunes!) and apples (dried apple rings if you wish) berries (to use in baking) and fruit leathers. Some fruits can also be honey dipped (dunking in a solution of honey and sugar before drying) to increase sweetness. You can find recipes for creating your own dehydrated camp food, providing compact, light weight food that is easy to carry in a backpack. You can also dry vegetables to enjoy as a snack or add to soups and stews. With the removal of the water, the flavour is concentrated, which can add to the appeal of foods, such as dried tomatoes, dried mushrooms etc. If dried food is kept in air tight packaging, it will keep indefinitely.

The most obvious place for drying food is in the oven. The heat should be on a low setting – around 60° C on an electric oven. If using a gas oven for drying, turn the dial to 0 or ¼ - the lowest flame possible. It will probably also be necessary to prop open the oven door to assist the drying process providing some ventilation. With solid-fuel oven, the heat maintained after cooking sessions can be utilized. This may mean that the drying process is not continuous and has to be carried out over several days but this should not affect the quality of the finished product. In the summer months it may be possible to dry some food by the sun, and you will find plans for creating simple home solar dryers in books or online. Although you may find that here in the Highlands, we are limited in the days when there are sufficient hours of sun and the humidity relatively low when it would be successful. You may wish to partially dry some food resting on a non-stick sheet on a sunny window sill inside, and finish off perhaps in the oven. You can also dry your food in a specialist food dehydrator, which is handy if you are wishing to dry a large quantity of food at a time. A food dehydrator is a small electrical appliance for drying foods indoors. It has an electric element for heat and a fan and vents for air circulation.

For drying purposes, vegetables are best picked when slightly immature, whereas fruit should be left to ripen thoroughly. In general, the faster the food is dried, the better the result, however, this shouldn't be at temperatures which are too high resulting in cooking the food. You can chop your food into slices and lay them out to dry, shred finely, or puree, to create dried leather. A good non-stick surface (such as silicone baking sheets) to place your food on while drying should prevent it getting stuck on.

Bottling / canning

Bottling / canning is a method of preserving by heating in a sealed container. Food is preserved in the jar as a vacuum is created, so the food doesn't need sugar or vinegar to help preserve it, although often. It is the homemade equivalent to tinned food. To ensure that it will keep, the fruit has to be heated sufficiently so that micro-organisms, enzymes and yeasts that are naturally occurring in fruit are destroyed. There are two types of vacuum jar that can be used – a screw topped jar with a rubber seal built into the lid (e.g. kilner), and a clip jar, with a separate rubber ring gasket (e.g. le parfait). These rings should only be used once, since they tend to stretch and deteriorate during use.

Fruit is often bottled in a sugar syrup, which helps to maintain colour and adds to taste. You can vary the strength of the syrup according to taste, but often 400g sugar per 1 litre water is used. It is also possible to bottle fruit in fruit juice, or wine. Spices such as mustard seeds, cloves, allspice, coriander seeds and black peppercorns can be added. You may also create sauces such as a tomato / ragout sauce, which do not contain sufficient sugar or vinegar to preserve the food, which can be stored by bottling.

Bottling should be carried out with care, as lack of quality control in the process may allow ingress of water or micro-organisms. Most such failures are rapidly detected as decomposition within the jar causes gas production, which may lead to a hissing sound as gas escapes. There are more likely to be problems with the reintroduction of bacteria and associated toxins (an extreme example being botulism) with bottling vegetables, so it is recommended to bottle just fruit at home.

Processing the bottles may be done on the hob or in the oven. The hob method is known as the water-bath method of which there are two main variations, the quick water-bath and Pressure Cooker. A false bottom is recommended with each method so that the jars are not in contact with the base of the pan as the heat rises.

The oven method involves placing the jars with syrup or juice in a pre heated oven and leaving for the required time according to the recipe you are following – different types of fruit will need different times. Place the lids on top but not the clips or screw bands. Put the bottles 2 inches (50mm) apart on a baking tray or tin lined with newspapers (in case any liquid boils out during processing) on the centre shelf of the oven.

With both methods, after the bottles have been left for 24 hours and are completely cool, it is necessary to ensure that a complete vacuum has been formed during the processing and that no air is in the bottles. Remove the clips or screw-bands, lift the bottles carefully by the lids and, if these are tight and secure, the seal is complete.

Preserving your Food - Freezing and Storing

August, September and October can be busy months for the gardener, stocking up for the rest of the year. You may find that you have a "glut" of one thing or another and as though you have to be giving your vegetables away, as you have more than you can eat. However, there are ways that you can preserve your garden produce to last you longer. These notes describe, methods where little processing of your crop are used, so that your vegetables are suitable for use in a form that is close to how they might be if freshly harvested.

Freezing

The ideal is to eat fresh from the garden, but the fact is you'll always have a surplus and it is nice to eat your favourites out of season. Some things are unsuitable for freezing such as chicory, cucumber, endive, kale, lettuce, radishes, and Jerusalem artichokes. Other vegetables, such as potatoes and other roots are best stored in other ways, but you can freeze if you wish. Freezing is one of the easiest ways to store the surplus and retains taste and vitamins.

Successful freezing depends on how quickly you can reduce the temperature of the food. Slow freezing may not make the food inedible but will affect flavour and, more importantly, nutritional value. Fast freezing halts bacterial growth instantly and produces very small ice crystals, which causes less damage to the cell structure of the food. Before you commence preparing food for freezing you should turn your freezer on to its super or fast setting – preferably 3 hours or so before. This just keeps the motor running and drops the temperature as low as possible. When the food goes into the freezer it will cause the temperature to rise as the food cools. The super setting ensures the food already there remains at optimum temperature and the food being frozen cools as quickly as possible. Do not try to freeze too much in one go – never more than 10% of the freezer capacity at a time. Also, the colder the food when it goes into the freezer, the less work the freezer has to do. You could consider pre-cooling your produce in the fridge down to about 5 degrees before freezing.

To get your food to store well in the freezer you need to blanch it. This is essential with most vegetables. Blanching destroys certain enzymes and bacteria whilst helping to preserve the colour, texture and flavour of the food. It also helps retain vitamin C. The method is really quite simple. You need to put the food into boiling water and raise its temperature as fast as possible. You need at least 6 pints of water per 1lb of produce. You also need a blanching basket. This is just a sieve to hold the produce together. So, plunge into the water which needs to be back up to a rolling boil in 1 minute or less. If you can't do that – blanch smaller portions. Different vegetables will have slightly different recommended times for blanching, varying between 2 minutes for peas and beans, and 45 minutes of beetroot. Details for how long to blanch each vegetable can be found in books such as those in the reference section, or online.

After this you need to get the temperature down as fast as possible and stop the cooking process. You could try plunging into a bowl of cold water for 5 seconds or so to kill the heat then transfer to a second large bowl of water with ice cubes in it, changing the water in the first bowl each time to keep it as cold as possible.

When the food is cold, remove from the water and drain or dry off. You can freeze by either packing either straight into freezer bags or laying out on baking trays first, so that smaller items don't just clump together when frozen.

Drying and cold storage

With some care, you can enjoy your own produce year round using no technology or electricity at all. Drying and cold storage are easy and inexpensive ways to preserve and for storing vegetables. Onions, garlic, and chilli peppers are usually dried. Squash, potatoes, apples and root crops are best kept in cold storage. When storing vegetables you need to sort out the damaged or any showing signs of rot and use these first as if they rot, the rot will spread and ruin your whole crop. It is a good idea to regularly check

your stored produce to keep an eye out for any that are starting to spoil, so that it doesn't spread to the rest.

General Guidelines for storage:

- Plant vegetable varieties bred for winter keeping.
- Don't wash vegetables before putting into cold storage - use a brush to remove soil.
- Remove tops off root vegetables.
- Check vegetables in cold storage frequently and remove any that are spoiled.

Choose your location and preservation method for storing vegetables based on the vegetable's preferred temperature and humidity, as listed below:

- Cool and dry: onions, apples
- Cool and moist: root crops, potatoes, cabbage
- Warm and dry: squash, pumpkins, dried chilli peppers

In-ground "clamp" Vegetable Storage

Roots, tubers, and bulb vegetables require little effort to store. Some vegetables - including beets, carrots, parsnips, Swede, celeriac, and turnips - can be left in the ground until you want to use them. Cover with a 1-2 foot (30-60 cm) layer of mulch such as straw or hay, which will trap air and won't become saturated with water, an easy way of storing vegetables. You can also use wood chips or leaves if you remove them before they decompose in the spring. The upside of in-ground storage is that it's easy. The downside is that vegetables can be damaged if it's too cold or too rainy, and harvesting is difficult to impossible if the ground is frozen. Potatoes are not suitable for in-ground storage.

Cold Storing Vegetables

Storage spaces in the home can approximate old-fashioned root cellars. Your "root cellar" should be a cool, dry, dark space, such as a cool cupboard, shed or garage. Optimal cold storage temperatures are 7°-10°C. The best storing vegetables for root cellaring are beetroot, carrots, parsnips, potatoes, pumpkins, Swedes, turnips and squash.

As a type of cold storage, some vegetables store well packed in layers of damp sand or sawdust in wooden boxes, or plastic buckets. Beets, carrots, parsnips, Swedes, kohlrabi, and turnips can be preserved this way. Place boxes where they will be stored - they're heavy when full - and alternate layers of vegetables and layers of damp sand.

Storing Potatoes

When you first harvest your potatoes, you should leave them out in the sun for a few hours to dry off and allow the skin to harden a little. After this, brush off any excess soil and check for damage. Sometimes it is hard to tell as a little hole on the surface can indicate a network of tunnels and even a live slug hiding in the potato so check as carefully as you can. Any forked, slugged or suspect potatoes should be put to one side and used as quickly as possible. Unlike other root crops, potatoes should preferably be stored above 5° C as below that the starch turns into sugars, which can give them a sweet taste. The optimum temperature range is between 5 and 10° C. The most

important point when storing potatoes is to exclude light. Prolonged exposure to light will cause greening of the potato. Partially green potatoes are still edible – just cut off the affected parts. You can store potatoes in paper sacks but leave the neck slightly open to allow excess moisture to escape.

Storing Onions and Garlic

Leave onions in the ground until the stalks fall over and are almost completely dry. Dig up the onions and dry in the sun - on a screen to hasten the process - for one to three weeks. Braid the dried onion stalks and hang up the braided bundles. Another vegetable storage method for onions is to cut the stems off to 1/2 inch (1.25 cm), put



Onions drying before storing

the onions in a mesh bag, and hang them up. Dry and cure garlic as for onions. Cut tops and roots both to 1/2" (12 mm), put in net bags and hang. Garlic can either be stored at room temperature or in cold storage at 32°-40°F (0°-4.5°C). Beware of temperatures between 5°-11°C which will cause garlic to sprout.

Storing Apples and Pears

Early varieties of apple and pear are best eaten straight away rather than stored, while the later varieties can be kept in a cool, dark place, wrapped individually and loosely (not sealed) in paper to keep each from its neighbour. Specialist apple racks are available, but shallow boxes or a chest of drawers will do the job, kept somewhere cool.

Preserving your Produce – Recipes

It is important to think about what sorts of things you actually will eat and use. There is little point in making oodles of jam, if you don't eat much of the stuff, unless you wish to give it as presents. You will probably find it is a process of learning by trial and error, as the sorts of things that you can create yourself may not just like everyday goods from the supermarket. For example, one less successful creation from my own experience was elderberry ketchup – which was made and rarely used. One great success, however, was making a mango-style chutney using locally grown cherry plums. Please see the separate notes on methods of preserving, covering jams, chutneys, drying and bottling. In these notes some simple, pleasing recipes are detailed. These could form useful staples in your food cupboards, replacing the need for some shop-bought goods, such as canned tomatoes, passata sauces, stir-fry sauces and cordial / squash.

- Berry Cordials / juices
- Tomato passata sauce
- Chinese style plum sauce
- Mango style cherry plum chutney
- Spiced tomato and sweet corn relish

Berry Cordial

You can make a delicious cordial or syrup from many types of berry, throughout the summer and autumn. Place your fruit in a pan and bring quickly to the boil. Boil the fruit for about a minute, then turn off the heat, and crush the fruit with a masher, or wooden spoon. To separate the juice from the pulp, use a scaled jelly bag, and strain overnight. Extract as much juice as you can. Then add the sugar – 350g for each pint of juice extracted, stirring well until the sugar is dissolved. Heat up your syrup / cordial, and bottle into clean, sterile bottles. If you wish to store this for longer than a few weeks, you may wish to further heat treat the bottled cordials, either in an oven or in a water bath.

Tomato passata sauce

The versatile sauce makes a great basic ingredient, meaning that you can enjoy local tomatoes for more of the year, and you have a ready-made tasty sauce to have with pasta, to spread over your pizza base, or to create a tomato-based curry. The quantities and ingredients may vary according to what you have available.

Tomatoes
Onions
Garlic
Pepper
Courgettes
Fresh herbs

Chop up your tomatoes and place in a large pan on the heat, and reduce the liquid down. Add in courgette, and pepper if you have these and wish to include them in your sauce. Reducing may take sometime. If you are doing large quantities, you may wish to use more than one pan to increase your surface area, as this will speed the process up. Lightly fry your onions and garlic, which can be added to your tomato pan(s). You can also consider oven roasting some of your tomatoes, onions and garlic, as this can give a sweeter, richer flavour. Use a food processor or hand blender to purée your sauce. When it has reached a consistency that you are happy with, then it is time to turn off the heat, and start to ladle it into clean, sterile jars. At this stage only loosely fit the lids. As this sauce does not contain high levels of sugar or vinegar to preserve it, a bottling process is required to ensure that it is well sealed. Place the jars on a backing tray, which should then go into the oven set to just less than 100° C, so that the contents don't boil over. After 45mins – 1 hour, remove from the oven, and tighten the lids (wearing oven gloves!).

Chinese style plum sauce

This is nice to add to stir-frys, or for dipping.

6 lb plums
4.4 lb sugar
A little oil
3 onions, chopped
2 - 3 bulbs of garlic, chopped (depending on size) - lots of cloves, anyway!
2 large chillies, chopped
5- 6 "thumbs" of ginger, grated
3 - 4 teaspoons of Chinese 5 spice
1/2 pint vinegar

Combine the plums (stoned) and the sugar and heat in a large pan, stirring until the juices of the plums mix with and dissolve the sugar.

Bring it to a rolling boil, and scoop off any scum.

Then turn the heat down, and cook slowly, reducing the fluid, and letting the fruit & sugar caramelise. (May take 2 - 3 hours!)

In a separate pan, fry the onion, and then after a few minutes, add the chopped garlic, chillies and grated ginger, and Chinese 5 spice.

When the plum mix has reached a consistency that you are happy with (I was looking for something fairly jam like), add in the fried onion and spices and pour in the vinegar.

Mix up the contents of the pan, and keep on the heat for long enough for the vinegar to be brought up to temperature too.

Pour or ladle into clean, sterile jars!

Mango-style Cherry Plum style chutney

3 lb stoned cherry plums (or ordinary plums)
5 table spoon salt
9 cups water
1 lb sugar
2 ½ cups white wine vinegar
2 inches fresh ginger, chopped
6 cloves of garlic, crushed
2 tbsp hot chilli powder
1 cinnamon stick
1 cup pitted dates
1 cup raisins

Place the stoned plums in a bowl. Add the salt and water and set aside in a cool place for 24 hours. Place the sugar and vinegar in a heavy bottomed saucepan and bring to the boil, stirring until the sugar is dissolved. Strain the plums, and discard the juice.

Add the plums to the sugar vinegar syrup. Add the remaining ingredients, and bring to the boil, stirring frequently. Reduce the heat and simmer, stirring occasionally for about 1 ½ hours until the chutney is very thick. Remove the cinnamon stick, and ladle the chutney into clean, sterilised jars and secure the lids.

Spiced tomato and sweet corn relish

1.5 kg Tomatoes, chopped
1 cob of sweet corn
440g Sugar
2 large onions, chopped
2 cups vinegar
1 tbsp vegetable oil
2 – 3 cloves garlic
2 teaspoons cumin seeds
1 teaspoon fennel seeds
1 teaspoon fenugreek seeds
1 teaspoon black onion seeds
1 teaspoon brown mustard seeds.
Juice of 1/3 a Lemon

Combine tomatoes and onion in a large saucepan and add sugar and vinegar. Bring to the boil and simmer, stirring frequently for about 40 minutes or until mixture is reduced and thickens slightly.

Combine the spices, and fry in vegetable oil. Stir the spices into tomato mixture; add the corn and simmer, stirring for 2-3 minutes until mixture thickens.

Spoon into clean, sterilised jars and seal when cool.

Leave out the sweet corn to make a delicious spicy tomato relish.

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