

Preserving the Bounty of Your Garden

by Valerie Jean Rose

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Preserve the bounty of your garden.

Vivian Smallwood certainly can can. As the Food Safety Program Assistant for the WSU Skagit County Extension Service, Smallwood shares decades of experience preserving homegrown foods. She recalls, “From early on in my childhood I remember my mom canning. There were seven of us children so she canned a lot!” Smallwood’s father hunted and she helped her mother can meats along with fruits and vegetables from the family garden. “We probably enjoyed the meats the most: beef, elk, and venison. But the fruits were great, too.”

Many Skagit-area gardeners want to enjoy their produce long after the harvest season. An array of your favorite foods can be safely preserved through canning, freezing, drying or storage in root cellars. Smallwood will share an overview of these processes at this month’s *Know and Grow Workshop*, presented by Skagit County Master Gardeners (see Infobox for details.) Smallwood will discuss how to preserve foods while safeguarding against contamination. As a bonus, she will demonstrate safe canning techniques using cotton balls (for illustration purposes only, not for actual consumption.)

Root Causes

Many food preservation methods have deep roots in Native cultures. For centuries, indigenous people around the Salish Sea dried salmon, meats, berries and other foods. “Almost anything can be preserved by dehydration,” notes Smallwood. “But in our climate you almost always need a dehydrator.” Thankfully this technology is relatively inexpensive and simple to use.

Root cellars are another time-tested way to preserve foods. “If set up correctly, root cellars are a good way to preserve some foods,” says Smallwood. “Potatoes, apples, cabbage, winter squashes and many of the vegetables that grow in the ground, like carrots, can be placed in the root cellars. Carrots can also be overwintered in the ground.” Spared the risk of frozen ground, many root vegetables can stay in the garden through the winter. In the Pacific Northwest, the soil grows and protects beets, parsnips, turnips, beets and more. Overwintering varieties of cabbage, kale, collards, cauliflower and even lettuces can stay in your garden well past summer. Protect the plants (especially lettuces and spinach) with mulch or a low hoop-house, and enjoy these fresh vegetables in the fall, winter or early spring. Add them to a soup made from home-canned tomatoes for a taste of summer as cold rains wash the world outside your windows.

Safety First

Some foods are safely canned using a water-bath method: filling sterilized canning jars with properly prepared foods, then boiling the jars for a prescribed time. But some foods, with a low acid content, require a different technology. “Canning low-acid vegetables, meats, fish and poultry requires the use of a pressure canner,” according to Dr. Elizabeth L. Andress, Professor and Extension Specialist at the University of Georgia/National Center for Home Food Preservation. “Spores of *Clostridium botulinum* bacteria, as found naturally in soils, are very, very heat resistant. Even hours in the boiling water canner will not kill them if they are inside your jars of beans. Left alive after canning, they will eventually germinate into actively growing bacterial cells that will produce a deadly human toxin when consumed. The bacteria like the conditions inside closed jars of low-acid foods (such as vegetables and meats) sitting at room temperature, so they must be killed during the canning process for safe storage.” In other words, use a pressure canner or other methods for preserving low-acid foods.



Canned foods are on display by the Skagit Valley Grange 620 at the Skagit County Fair through Saturday. Canning and pickling are a few ways to preserve food. **Photo by Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald.**

Where to begin?

For someone new to the canning process, Smallwood suggests starting with processed fruits. “Jams and jellies are easy and quickest, a good beginning place.” For people seeking alternatives to high-sugar foods, Smallwood says there are safe alternatives. “Sugar helps to control color and firmness for a longer time, but for diabetics, sugar substitutes work well. Fruits can be canned without sugar, or with a sugar substitute. Most canning books and pectin instructions now give the necessary adjustments needed to use them.”

Improvising in the kitchen can be tasty and adventurous, but not when it comes to canning. Smallwood cautions that safely canning food requires the most current knowledge. “The most common mistakes that people make when learning to can is not following a tested recipe or instructions,” she notes. “Our grandmother's recipes can be dangerous if not updated correctly. Most of the older canning instructions were revised and tested during the mid 1990s. If you are using a book published before 1996, many of those recipes could be dangerous.”

For safe, well-tested canning recipes, visit the WSU Extension or USDA websites information from the National Center for Home Food Preservation (see Resources list.)

You can also watch videos and slide shows demonstrating safe food processing and preserving methods.

With the right knowledge and tools, you can safely preserve and enjoy the bounty of Skagit County's fruits, vegetables, seafood, game meats and other treats. Organize a canning party with your friends! Buy a lug of fruit and share the processing, drying and resulting tasty snacks. Make your own delicious, healthy holiday presents from home-grown fruits and vegetables, or buy your boxes of luscious produce at the farmers market. Share these delights with others, enjoy them in your own household - home-preserved foods will stretch the bountiful summer well into the cool, rainy months.

RESOURCES:

- US Department of Agriculture recommended procedures for canning:
 - Most vegetables, meat and seafoods: www.uga.edu/nchfp/how/can4_vegetable.html
 - Tomatoes and tomato products: www.uga.edu/nchfp/how/can3_tomato.html
- National Center for Home Food Preservation instructions:
 - Freezing foods: www.uga.edu/nchfp/how/freeze.html
 - Drying foods: www.uga.edu/nchfp/how/dry.html
 - Curing and smoking foods: www.uga.edu/nchfp/how/cure_smoke.html
 - Fermenting foods: www.uga.edu/nchfp/how/can6a_ferment.html
 - Pickling foods: www.uga.edu/nchfp/how/can6b_pickle.html
- Botulism and canning food safely: www.uga.edu/nchfp/how/general/ensuring_safe_canned_foods.html
- Videos and Slideshows of Canning and Freezing Techniques: www.uga.edu/nchfp/multimedia.html

INFOBOX:

What:	<i>Know and Grow Workshop:</i> “Preserving the Bounty of Your Garden”
Date:	Tuesday - August 17
Time:	1:00 - 2:30 P.M.
Where:	WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Research and Extension Center, 16650 State Route 536 (Memorial Highway)
Questions:	360-428-4270, ext. 0

Note: some hyperlinks in this article have been updated since its initial publication.