

GUIDES · KITCHEN

Preserve the Harvest

Freezing, drying, and canning basics for the food you pick up from local farms.

FREE GUIDE

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Before you start

A bushel of tomatoes or a box of beans from a farm stand is a good problem to have. Preserving it lets you eat local food in February. Freezing is the easiest place to start. Canning is more rewarding and also more exacting, because a mistake can make people sick.

This guide is a short orientation. It does not give canning recipes or processing times. Those come from tested sources, and I point you to them below.

Where this comes from. The guidance below is from the National Center for Home Food Preservation (NCHFP, at the University of Georgia) and University of Minnesota Extension, checked October 11, 2026. For recipes and times, use their current pages or your county's Cornell Cooperative Extension office.

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Choose and freeze

Start with the easiest method.

1. Pick a method

Method	Good for	Effort
Freezing	Berries, corn, beans, greens, peppers, most vegetables	Low
Drying	Herbs, fruit, jerky, fruit leathers	Medium
Boiling-water canning	Acid foods such as many fruits, jams, and pickles made from tested recipes	Medium
Pressure canning	Low-acid foods such as vegetables, meats, and soups	Higher

If you're new to this, begin with freezing and move on when you're ready.

2. Freezing

Blanch most vegetables first. Blanching is a brief heating in boiling water or steam, followed right away by cooling. University of Minnesota Extension says it deactivates enzymes that affect color, flavor, and freshness, so the vegetable keeps its quality in the freezer.

- **Use plenty of water:** 1 gallon per pound of vegetables, or 2 gallons per pound for leafy greens.
- **Time it.** Their table gives, in minutes for boiling water: small asparagus 2, green beans 3, greens (other than collards) 2, collards 3, and medium corn on the cob 9.
- **Cool at once** in cold running water or an ice-water bath. It should take no more than a few minutes.
- **Dry and spread out** the vegetables in a single layer, and let them air dry before you freeze them.

Freeze at 0°F, label with the date, and see my guide *Stock Your Freezer from Local Farms* for freezer habits.

Canning and drying

Where the safety rules matter most.

3. Canning: the rules that matter

- **Use a tested recipe.** Don't improvise on how long to process, what goes in the jar, or how you pack it. NCHFP says some practices don't prevent all risks of spoilage.
- **Match the canner to the food.** NCHFP says low-acid foods must be processed in a pressure canner to be free of botulism risks. Boiling-water canners are recommended for acid foods because they're faster.
- **Skip the shortcuts.** NCHFP does not recommend open-kettle canning, or processing filled jars in an oven, microwave, or dishwasher. It also says canning powders are useless as preservatives, and that "dry canning" vegetables can cause under-processing and a risk of botulism.
- **Check the details for your recipe.** Processing times depend on altitude and other factors, so use the recipe's own instructions. NCHFP has a page for finding your elevation.

4. Cool, check, and store your jars

- **Don't retighten lids** on hot jars. Let jars cool at room temperature for 12 to 24 hours.
- **Test the seals** after cooling. Remove the screw bands, then press the center of the lid. If it springs back, it isn't sealed. A sealed lid curves slightly downward.
- **If a jar didn't seal**, refrigerate it and eat the food within several days, or follow NCHFP's steps to reprocess or freeze it.
- **Store** jars without the screw bands, in a clean, cool, dark, dry place. NCHFP says 50 to 70°F is best, and not above 95°F.
- **Label and date** the jars, and can no more than you'll use within about a year.

5. Drying

Dried food is light, keeps without refrigeration, and is good for herbs, fruit, jerky, and fruit leathers. NCHFP lists food dehydrators, sun drying, and vine drying as methods. Temperatures, pretreatment, and storage depend on the food, so follow its drying pages for what you're making. Add water to dried foods an hour or two before you use them.

6. Where to get tested recipes

- **NCHFP** at nchfp.uga.edu. It has canning, freezing, drying, pickling, fermenting, and jam pages, with tested recipes.
- **Your county's Cornell Cooperative Extension office.** Call and ask about food preservation. Ask them about testing a dial-gauge pressure canner, too.
- **Your farm.** Ask when they have seconds or bulk boxes of tomatoes, peaches, or beans. Those are made for preserving.

Before you can, check:

- ☐ I have a tested recipe for this exact food.
- ☐ I know whether it needs a boiling-water canner or a pressure canner.
- ☐ I've checked the processing time for my elevation.
- ☐ I'll test every seal before I store a jar.

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