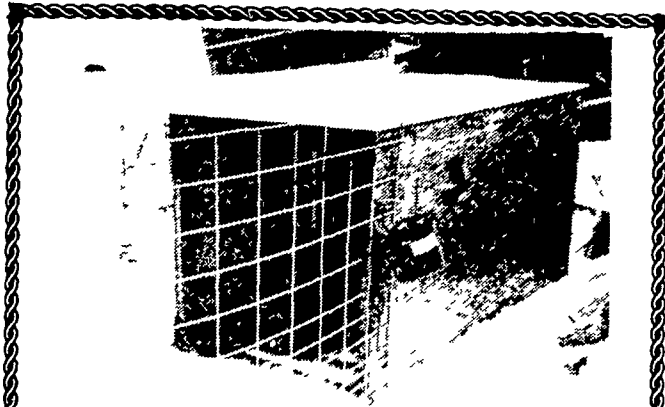


Food drying can be useful if the drought didn't beat you to it

Why not dry the last of your garden produce?

The end of the gardening season is nearly upon us, and after a season of canning, freezing and eating the produce from backyard gardens, it's time to think about preserving the last of the bounty.



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In this era of rising energy costs and food prices, many families are using food preservation techniques which had been forsaken in recent years for supermarket convenience. One of these techniques, food drying, is particularly useful at the end of the gardening season, and is experiencing a resurgence today.

Food drying was once practiced out of necessity, but today, families are using dehydrated food as snack foods, for backpacking or camping, as a hobby, and as a method of preserving some of the abundance from backyard gardens.

There are several methods of dehydrating foods — in the gas or electric oven, with a specially built food dehydrator, with wood stoves, with solar heat, with convection ovens, and some innovative methods using ordinary light bulbs.

If your goal is to save money drying food, consider the cost of your power source, of constructing a solar dryer, or of purchasing a dehydrator, before you start your adventure.

The Cooperative Extension offices throughout the state are loaded with good information on food drying, from selecting the best quality fruit to constructing simple food dehydrators. Why not contact your county Extension office today and request information on food drying?

Some foods such as herbs, peas and beans may be dried in the old fashioned way by harvesting the entire stalks, tying the stalks in bunches and hanging them in a warm dry place or in the sun. If you hang them in the sun, cover them with a net to protect them from insects and dust.

Other foods are usually dried on trays. You can use cookie trays, but you'll get a better product if the trays are ventilated. Cheesecloth stretched over an oven rack will serve as a temporary tray. Screen or wood slot trays are more satisfactory. You can build them to fit your drying unit.

To make your own drying trays, build a wood frame and then stretch aluminum screening or stainless steel hardware cloth over the frames.

The principle of drying food is to remove enough moisture from the item to prevent enzyme activity and the growth of bacteria, yeast and molds which causes food spoilage.

Once you have dried batches and batches of fruits and vegetables, be sure to store them properly. Home canning jars, if available, are excellent choices. Clean, empty glass jars with screw lids are also good. You can also pack dried food in plastic bags. Squeeze out as much air as possible before you tie the bag tightly with a metal twist or rubber band. Several bags of dried food can be stored together in a metal container.

Storing foods in amounts that will be consumed soon after opening is advisable. After packaging your foods, store them in a cool, dark place — a basement or cellar is suitable.

PEAS — To dry peas, clean and shell them, then blanch them for two minutes in water or three minutes in steam. Spread them on trays and dry them until they're brittle. In an oven, dry three hours, in a dehydrator, eight to ten hours, and in the sun, six to eight hours.

HERBS — Herbs are good for people just starting out in food drying. Most herbs are at the peak of their flavor just before flowering. Cut herbs early in the morning just after the dew has dried. Annuals should be cut at ground level and perennials about 1/3 of the way down the main stem, including the side branches. Wash herbs with the leaves on the stems lightly in cold running water to remove any soil, dust, bugs or other foreign material. Drain thoroughly on absorbent towels, or hang plants upside down in the sun until the water evaporates.

Strip leaves off the stalks once plants have drained and dried, leaving only the top 6 inches. Remove blossoms. No pretreatment is necessary. Spread the herbs on drying trays and dry until they're crisp and crumble easily. In an oven or dehydrator this will take 1-4 hours and in the sun 6-8 hours. Herbs can also be hung upside down in clusters and allowed to dry the old-fashioned way. This requires a warm, dry, well-ventilated room such as an attic with good air circulation. To protect them from dust, you can tie and hang them inside paper bags. For more information as well as information on the culture, harvesting and use of over 25 herbs, contact your county extension office and ask for the Growing Herbs in the Home Garden pamphlet.

APPLES — Apple slices are one of the most popular dried fruits and can be enjoyed as a snack as well as in rehydrated form. To prepare dried apples, wash, peel and core peak quality apples. Cut them into rings or slices 1/8 inch-3/4 inch thick. To help prevent browning during the preparation you have the option of treating the pieces with an ascorbic acid solution (2 1/2 teaspoons crystalline ascorbic acid to 1 cup water).

To pretreat the apple pieces you can either steam blanch them for 5-10 minutes or sulfur them 30-60 minutes, depending on the size of the pieces. Next spread them out on your trays, no more than two layers deep, and then dry for the recommended time. Sun drying would take approximately 3-4 days, dehydrator or oven drying would take 6-10 hours. Apples, like other dried fruits, are done when they are leathery and pliable with no moist area in the center when cut. Package your dried food in airtight containers and store in a cool, dry, dark place.

BEANS — If wet weather threatens the end of the growing season, or to dry Navy, Pinto, Red Kidney, White Marrowfat, Soy and Mung Beans or Alaska Peas, pull up the vines with pods attached and hang them in a warm, airy place. When the pods are completely dry, shell the seeds. Heat them for about 30 minutes in a 140-150° F. oven to prevent insect infestation during storage. Let the seeds cool, then seal them in airtight containers.

To dry beans in a food dehydrator, wash thoroughly, cut into short pieces lengthwise. Steam blanch for 2 1/2 minutes. Drying time in a dehydrator will be 2-3 hours, oven 3-5 hours, sun 8-10 hours.

CARROTS — Use only young crisp carrots. Wash thoroughly. Cut off roots and tops. Peel. Cut into slices 1/8 inch thick. Steam blanch for 3-4 minutes. Drying time will be 2-3 hours in a dehydrator, 3-5 hours in the oven, or 8 hours in the sun.

CORN — Harvest ears of sweet corn and pop corn when the stalks, leaves and husks are thoroughly dry. Hang the ears by the husks, or spread out the ears in baskets in an airy place. Shell when the kernels will come off with a moderately aggressive twist motion of both hands. Store the kernels in sealed containers.

Corn kernels may be dried by cutting the kernels from the ears after blanching in steam for 5 minutes. Drying time will be 1-2 hours in a dehydrator, 2-3 hours in the oven and 6 hours in the sun.

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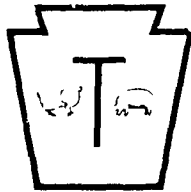
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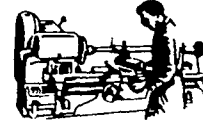
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