

Acidity Necessary For Success When Canning Home-Grown Tomatoes

NEWARK, Del. — Even though most folks consider the tomato a vegetable because of the way it's prepared, it is really a fruit. Like

other fruits, it is naturally high in acid. So, like them, it is usually processed in a boiling water bath. Nothing could be simpler, or

safer, provided the tomato product you're canning contains enough acid, says University of Delaware extension food specialist Dr. Sue

Snider. And this is where the great tomato preservation safety debate begins.

Which canning recommendation

is really safe? Are so-called low-acid tomato varieties really low-acid, thus requiring different treatment? Must yellow tomatoes be preserved differently than red ones? Can *Clostridium botulinum*, which produces deadly botulism toxin, really grow in home canned tomatoes?

As home food preservers thumb through their cookbooks over the next few weeks, they will find many different recommendations for processing tomatoes and tomato products. Some directions call for processing in a boiling water bath, others for pressure processing at 5, 10 or 15 pounds of pressure. Some sources may even mention low-acid versus high-acid tomatoes and recommend different treatments depending on the variety being used.

Snider has some information which may take the confusion out of preserving tomatoes. Here are her answers to key questions about this popular fruit and how to process it safely.

• Are some tomato varieties really low-acid?

"No! Even though seed companies may describe some tomatoes as low-acid, research has shown that these newer varieties don't differ much in acidity from the old standbys," the food specialist says. "Actually, the amount of acid in firm, ripe tomatoes has not decreased substantially over the past 25 years. Most tomatoes described as low-acid simply contain more sugar. This hides the tartness, giving the impression of mildness."

"And yellow tomatoes are no different from red ones in respect to acid content," says Snider. "So they should be processed in the same way."

• Why all the fuss about acid?

Level of acidity or pH is the key in determining which processing method is safe for canning any food, Snider explains. *C. botulinum* spores are inhibited at high acid levels (below 4.6 pH), so foods with adequate acid can be safely processed 212°F in a boiling water bath. However, low-acid foods, those with a pH of 4.6 or higher, must be processed in a pressure canner at 10 pounds of pressure, 240°F, to make sure *C. botulinum* spores are destroyed.

• What affects the acidity of a tomato?

Location and growing conditions, maturity of the fruit and its overall condition determine acidity. According to the food specialist, as a tomato ripens or matures, it becomes less and less acid. Therefore, an overripe tomato is less acidic than it was at its prime; and a ripe tomato has less acid than it did when it was green.

"Tomatoes harvested from dead vines have less acid than those from healthy, living vines," Snider says. "This is true even if the tomatoes look ripe. Those with soft or moldy spots are a real hazard. They may contain much less acid than a ripe tomato. Never use tomatoes with soft or decaying areas for canning; cutting out these places does not work! Never can tomatoes picked from dead vines, and always use the hot-pack method."

When canning tomatoes to which other vegetables have been added, the specialist says to always use a pressure canner. Water bath processing is considered safe only when firm, ripe, red, perfect tomatoes are used alone.

Snider urges anyone with questions about safe food preservation procedures to contact their county extension home economist.

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