

USDA Home Economists Talk Turkey

For Holiday Entertaining

WASHINGTON, D.C. — As the holidays approach, many of us are planning a traditional turkey dinner. But it's not easy getting the large bird ready for serving from its cold or frozen state.

Hundreds of new or uncertain cooks call the U.S. Department of Agriculture's toll-free Meat and Poultry Hotline (800-535-4555) for help. Here's how home economists answer some typical questions about preparing turkey.

Q. My grandmother says the secret to her tasty turkey is buying a fresh, not a frozen, bird. In my town, the stores are sold out of fresh turkey a week before the holidays. What should I do?

A. Buy a fresh turkey only if you can arrange to purchase it shortly before your meal. USDA microbiologists recommend cooking poultry within two days of the date of purchase. If fresh or thawed turkeys are refrigerated at home any longer than that, you could have spoilage problems.

If you can't follow this time frame, buy a frozen bird. Or bake your fresh bird soon after purchase, then carve and refrigerate it until your holiday meal. Cooked turkey (with stuffing removed) will keep in the refrigerator from three to four days. Stuffing and gravy (refrigerated in separate dishes) will keep one to two days. To reheat gravy, bring it to a rolling boil before serving.

Q. I've never prepared a turkey before. I have a 16-pound turkey in the freezer — how do I go about defrosting it?

A. A frozen turkey can be thawed safely in the refrigerator. An eight to 12 pound turkey takes from one to two days to thaw in a refrigerator; 12-16 pounds, two to three days; 16-20 pounds, three to four days; 20-24 pounds, four to five days. Large pieces of frozen turkey — a half, quarter or breast — take from one, to two days to thaw in the refrigerator.

Another method for thawing frozen turkey is immersing the bird in cold water. Be sure the wrapping is intact. If not, wrap it in a plastic bag. Immerse in cold water in the sink or in a large tub. Refill with cold water frequently — about every 30 minutes. An eight to 12 pound bird takes four to six hours to thaw in cold water; 12-16 pounds, six to nine hours; 16-20 pounds, six to nine hours; 16-20 pounds, nine to 11 hours; 20-24

pounds; 11-12 hours.

A faster way to thaw turkey is to use a microwave oven — if it is big enough. Follow the manufacturer's directions.

After it's thawed, wash the turkey under cold running water. Remove the neck and giblets and wash them, then wash inside and outside the bird. Drain thoroughly.

WARNING: Never defrost a turkey on the counter or table top. Bacteria multiply so rapidly at room temperature that the temperature range from 60° F. to 125° F. is called the "Danger Zone." In the hours it takes for a turkey to thaw, the surface bacteria could multiply to dangerous levels.

An remember, prevent the spread of bacteria during thawing and preparation by using plenty of soap and hot water to wash your hands, utensils and cutting board as you work. Wash the sink, countertop and faucet handles also

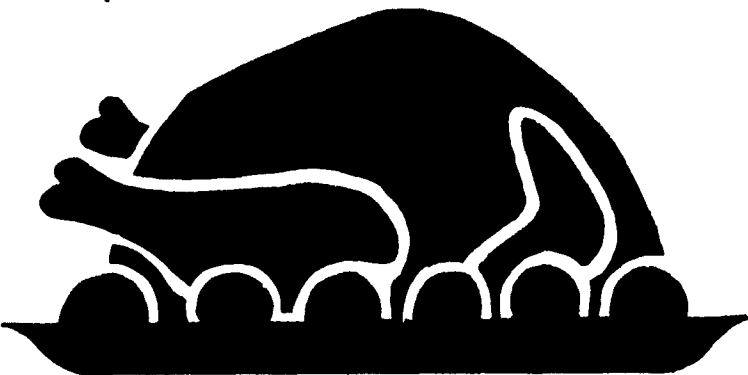
If you prefer a stuffed turkey, it is safest to stuff the bird just before pulling it in the oven. Otherwise, you run the risk of food poisoning bacteria multiplying in the stuffing. For that same reason, it's best not to buy a fresh bird that's been stuffed at the grocery.

To check stuffing for doneness, remove the bird from the oven and insert a thermometer into the stuffing. Wait five minutes, then check the temperature — it must reach at least 165 degrees F.

After cooking a stuffed turkey, scoop out the stuffing and serve it in a separate dish. Never leave the stuffing in the bird.

Q. I'm cooking the turkey for our Thanksgiving dinner to be held at my aunt's home 30 miles away. I'd like to cook it at home that morning. Would it be safe to do so?

A. Yes, but only if you'll be sitting down to eat the turkey within two hours after taking it



— as well as anything else that comes in contact with the raw bird or your hands.

Q. How can I tell when a turkey is done?

A. A turkey should be baked for 15 to 18 minutes per pound. To test for doneness, insert a meat thermometer into the thigh near the joint. The turkey is done when the thermometer reads 180 to 185° F. Another test for doneness is to stick a long-tined fork into the inner thigh. If the juices run clear — no pink — the turkey is done.

Q. I'd like to make stuffing for our Thanksgiving turkey, but it's so time-consuming. Any shortcuts?

A. The fastest — and safest — method is to bake the stuffing in a separate dish, not inside the turkey. That way, you can mix it while the bird is cooking, and it will be baked in 30 minutes. An unstuffed turkey bakes faster too.

from the oven. Also, you need to remove the stuffing after you take the bird out of the oven, and you must keep both bird and stuffing either hot or cold until serving time.

To cool the stuffing quickly, put it in the freezer. Then keep it on ice in a cooler until you can re-heat and serve.

Keep the fully-cooked turkey hot by wrapping it in foil, newspaper and towels. Put it in a large insulated picnic cooler or cardboard box stuffed with newspaper.

If you can't make it from oven to table in two hours, then prepare the bird in advance, slice, cool it quickly in the refrigerator and transport it in a cooler with ice.

WARNING. Never cook meat partially for completion of cooking later. Partial cooking provides ideal conditions for bacterial growth, which could lead to food poisoning.

Tatnall says to pick gourds from the vines when fully mature, and before frost. When ripe, the stems turn brown and begin to shrivel. Remove each fruit with a hand pruner, leaving a short stem piece attached.

Handle the fruits with care to avoid bruising and scratching. Wipe each fruit with a cloth dampened with rubbing alcohol to remove dirt and decay-causing organisms.

Cure gourds in a dry, airy place such as a screened porch, garage, or shed. Spread them evenly so they do not touch. Turn the fruits daily and discard any that shrivel or develop soft spots.

The entire curing process takes three to four weeks, says Tatnall. When completely dry, the gourds will have a hard, tough skin. Apply a regular floor or furniture wax, and polish with a soft cloth. Well-cured gourds will remain attractive for several months.

The fall and winter holiday seasons are ideal times for displaying decorative gourds. They are especially attractive in a fruit bowl, cornucopia, or in a loose arrangement on a table, chest, or mantel.

Ornamental Gourds Are Perfect For Fall Decorating

NEWARK, Del. — Ornamental gourds are interesting relatives of the squashes. They are useful in a number of ways, but their most popular use is for fall and winter decoration, says University of Delaware extension garden specialist Dave Tatnall.

Gourds come in a great variety of sizes and shapes, with solid colors and combinations of orange, yellow, green, and white. Their descriptive names are interesting too — ball, egg, pear, spoon, dipper, bottle, dolphin, Turk's turban, and Hercules club, to name just a few.

Count Your Blessings And Share Them With Us

As Thanksgiving Day approaches homemakers are busily planning their holiday meal, shopping for a turkey and contacting family members to make sure all will be present at the dinner table.

But pause for a moment from holiday preparations to consider the purpose of this national holiday — giving thanks to God. Too often we become engrossed in our daily struggles and spend more time complaining about what's wrong with our government, family and neighbors than counting the blessings that enrich our lives.

So take a minute or two from

your busy schedule and jot down the things you are thankful for this Thanksgiving. You may be thankful for a crisp autumn day, the brilliant colors of a sunrise, a healthy body, a loving family or the opportunity to live in a free country.

But no matter what is on your list, we at Lancaster Farming would like you to share it with us. Please send your list of blessings to us for publication. We'll feature them in our pre-Thanksgiving issue on Nov. 22.

You can send your responses to Sue Keene, Lancaster Farming Newspaper, 22 East Main Street, Lititz, PA 17541 by Nov. 17.

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