



Dry garden veggies for longtime bounty

I want to dehydrate some of the vegetables from my garden this year. What guidelines do you recommend?

Drying vegetables from the garden is an easy way to preserve food, and you can dry just about anything you grow. Unlike canning, which requires following precise instructions for processing safely, drying is more art than science. The key is to be sure to remove enough moisture to prevent mold or other spoilage organisms from contaminating your bounty, and to do so slowly enough so the food is actually dried, not cooked.

Many people sun-dry vegetables from the garden, but most experts don't recommend it, especially for a beginner — and especially with Ohio's unpredictable weather. The best weather for drying foods is a temperature in the 90s and low humidity.

Some people use their oven to dry foods, but that can be tricky, too. You need to keep the temperature between 130 and 150 degrees, with the oven door slightly ajar. Drying times can be quite lengthy, so this option may have little appeal during summer. Some manufacturers advise against using the oven for drying food; check your owner's manual.

Using a dehydrator is the most popular method for drying foods. Experts recommend getting one with an enclosed thermostat from 85 to 160 degrees, a fan or blower to distribute air evenly, and an instruction manual.

Dehydrator manuals will give you average drying times, but you need to look for certain characteristics to be sure your vegetables have dried enough. Different foods have different tests. For example, tomatoes will be leathery and dull red when dried; green beans will shatter when hit; peppers will be pliable. When you believe the vegetables are done, put them in a container; if condensation develops, they're not dry enough yet.

Some vegetables need to be pre-treated with blanching. This stops enzyme activity that can reduce quality during storage, and it also helps destroy harmful bacteria. Peas, broccoli, mushrooms, and green beans are a few vegetables that require blanching. A notable exception is tomatoes.

For details on these kinds of guidelines, The National Center for Home Food Preservation, housed at the University of Georgia and established by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, has several good resources. Just go to its Web site, <http://www.homefoodpreservation.com>, and click on "Dry." In addition, check out the "Drying Foods" fact sheet from Ohio State University Extension, online at <http://ohioline.osu.edu> (search for "Drying Foods," or click on "Food" and then "Food Preservation").

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