

What You Should Know About Preserving Food at Home

Denise Brochetti
Assistant Professor -
Nutrition

You may be thinking of canning and freezing food to help beat rising food costs, but preserving food at home may or may not save you money. Consider the following to decide whether or not it will help you cut costs:

- Cost of the food you want to preserve.
- Cost of added ingredients, such as sugar, spices, pectin, etc.
- Cost of equipment and supplies including canners, freezers, jars, lids, containers, utensils and other necessities.
- Cost of gas, electricity and water.
- Amount of storage space you have.
- Personal time and energy.

Cost of Food

How much you spend for food depends on where you get it, so try to find the most economical source. Grocery stores are usually the most expensive places to buy food. Produce can be less expensive when you buy it in season from farmers' markets, roadside stands and U-pick farms.

If you want to grow your own food, you will need to consider the time and energy you will spend in maintaining a garden plus the cost of equipment, fertilizers, seeds, water and tools. However, gifts from the gardens of family and friends will cost you nothing at all.

Which Method to Use

Canning and freezing are the two most common methods for preserving food. Freezing may be better for some foods, and canning may work better with others. Think about how you will

store the finished product. How much will your freezer hold? How much shelf space do you have for canned food? Plan to can only what you can use within a year because the quality will deteriorate after a year. Food safety experts recommend that you do not use most home-canned food after one year.



Make sure you follow safe, up-to-date directions for the food you want to preserve. Microorganisms grow quickly on the surfaces of fresh food and on the inside of bruised and insect-damaged food. These organisms not only cause food to spoil, but some also cause foodborne illness. Growth of the bacterium *Clostridium botulinum* in improperly canned low-acid foods may cause botulism, a deadly form of foodborne illness. So, it is necessary to follow directions carefully to be sure you have a finished product that is safe to eat.

Cost of Freezing Food

Freezing is the easiest and least time-consuming way to preserve food. Foods must be frozen at 0° F or below to retain nutrients, color, flavor and texture and to prevent the growth of microorganisms that cause it to spoil and lose quality. Some things to consider are the cost of buying a freezer if you do not have one, maintaining and

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repairing the freezer and the electricity needed to operate the freezer at the correct temperature.

You can save time and energy if you operate freezers properly. Consider the following to keep costs down:

- Chest freezers are less expensive to run, but upright freezers can be more convenient.
- Frost-free freezers cost as much or more to operate than conventional defrost freezers.
- Buy the size of freezer you need. Large freezers use more electricity.
- A full freezer uses less electricity per pound than a freezer that is half full.
- Do not place freezers in warm places, such as in the laundry room near heat-producing appliances, as freezers in warm places use more electricity.
- Keep the door closed as much as possible. Opening the door frequently uses more energy.
- Read the owner's manual to make sure you are operating and cleaning your freezer correctly.
- When freezing food, be sure to use the proper packaging to protect its flavor, color, texture and nutritional value.
- Containers should be moisture-vapor resistant, durable, leakproof, flexible, crack resistant at low temperatures and easy to seal and mark. Freezer bags and wraps are suitable for foods containing little or no liquid. Rigid plastic containers made from food-grade plastics can be used for freezing liquids.

Cost of Canning Food

Canning may be a less expensive way of preserving food, especially if you are an experienced canner and have many of the supplies and equipment you will need. However, you will spend more time than if you freeze the food. If you are a beginner, you may find it difficult to can certain foods until you gain some experience. Some things to consider are:

- Cost of pressure and/or water bath canners.
- Cost of jar funnels, lifters, jars, lids and other necessities.
- Cost of water, gas and electricity.
- Cost of added ingredients like vinegar, sugar and spices.

You must use canning procedures that will keep the food safe when it is stored at room temperature. Otherwise, the food that you have canned will spoil and it can make you sick. Use up-to-date procedures from reliable sources, such as the USDA *Complete*

Guide to Home Canning or the National Center for Home Food Preservation web site, www.uga.edu/nchfp.

If you want to can a variety of foods, you will need different types of canners. For canning high-acid foods, such as fruits, pickles, jellies and jams, you will need a boiling water canner. For canning low-acid vegetables (e.g., corn and beans), meats, fish and poultry, you will need a pressure canner. There are two basic types of pressure canners from which you can choose. One has a dial gauge to indicate the pressure inside the canner, and the other has a metal weighted gauge. Dial gauges must be tested for accuracy every year before you begin canning. All canners should have a rack in the bottom to keep jars off the bottom of the canner. USDA does not recommend the use of steam canners because they do not reach an internal temperature that is high enough (240°-250° F) to kill heat-resistant bacteria that may be present in foods.

To save time, money and frustration, you will need to plan ahead. Check the instructions for what you want to can well in advance, because you may need to allow time for purchasing certain ingredients and equipment. At the beginning of each canning season:

- Check your jars and decide if you need to buy new ones. Do not use very old jars and jars with nicks, cracks or chips, especially around the top sealing edge. These jars will break under pressure and heat.
- Buy new jars rather than used jars at yard sales or flea markets as this will save you money in the long run.
- Jars that use two-piece self-sealing metal lids are recommended. You must buy new flat lids every canning season. Do not reuse lids. Screw bands are reusable only if they are not bent, dented or rusted.
- Be sure you have the right storage place. If it is too hot, the food will lose its quality. If it is too cold, the food will freeze and the jars will burst. Store food between 50° and 70° F, and use it within a year.

References

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DENISE BROCHETTI, Ph.D., R.N., assistant professor - nutrition, University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture, Little Rock.

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