

KEEP WHAT YOU GREW

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO FOOD PRESERVATION

Freeze it. Dry it. Ferment it. Can it safely. Use what makes sense.

The goal is not to preserve every tomato until your kitchen becomes a small factory. It is to keep the foods you actually eat, using methods that fit the crop, the time you have, and the level of food-safety control the method requires.

PRESERVE THE HARVEST. NOT YOUR SANITY.

01 Preserve with a purpose.

The best method is the one that keeps food useful instead of turning preservation into another chore.

Preservation is not one technique. It is a toolbox. Freezing is fast. Drying saves space. Fermentation changes flavor. Canning can make shelf-stable food when a tested process is followed exactly. Cool storage can preserve certain crops with almost no processing at all.

- Start with foods you already buy or cook regularly.
- Preserve at peak quality. Preservation does not improve tired, bruised or spoiled produce.
- Match the method to the crop instead of forcing every harvest into jars.
- Label everything with the food, method and date.
- For canning and fermented foods, use current research-based recipes and proportions from trusted sources rather than improvising.

ONE QUESTION FIRST

Before you preserve anything, ask: How am I actually going to use this in January? That answer usually tells you whether to freeze, dry, ferment, can, or simply eat it now.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

CHOOSE THREE FOODS

Pick three crops you regularly use. Choose one preservation method for each based on how you cook. A freezer bag of chopped peppers may be more valuable to you than twelve decorative jars you never open.

02 Choose the method from the end use.

Preservation gets simpler when you work backward from dinner.

- Freezing: excellent for vegetables, fruit, herbs, sauces and prepared ingredients when freezer space is available.
- Drying: useful for herbs, fruit, many vegetables and ingredients you want light, compact and shelf-stable.
- Freeze-drying: preserves many foods with very low moisture, but requires specialized equipment and careful packaging.
- Refrigerator preservation: good for short-term pickles, relishes, sauces and foods meant to stay cold.
- Fermentation: useful when a tested process safely develops acidity while creating a flavor you actually enjoy.
- Canning: useful for shelf-stable foods, but only when the exact food, jar size, acidity, processing method, time and altitude adjustment come from a tested recipe.
- Cool / dry storage: ideal for properly cured garlic, onions, winter squash and other crops that store well with minimal processing.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

MAKE A PRESERVATION MAP

Write each crop across the top of a page. Under it, list the methods you would realistically use. Cross out anything that requires equipment, space, or a cooking style you do not have.

03 Freezing: the easiest place to start.

For many gardeners, the freezer gives the highest return for the least drama.

Freezing slows microbial growth and chemical changes but does not sterilize food. Quality depends heavily on starting with good produce, preparing it correctly, cooling it quickly, and protecting it from air and moisture loss.

- Most vegetables benefit from blanching before freezing because blanching slows enzyme activity that damages flavor, color and texture.
- Blanching time is crop-specific. Use a current research-based chart rather than guessing.
- Cool vegetables promptly after blanching, drain well, package, label and freeze.
- Many fruits can be frozen without blanching; preparation depends on the fruit and intended use.
- Freeze herbs in ways that match how you cook - chopped, in portions, or incorporated into sauces rather than expecting every leaf to thaw like fresh.

DO NOT IMPROVISE BLANCHING TIMES

The National Center for Home Food Preservation publishes crop-specific freezing and blanching guidance. Underblanching can be worse for quality than no blanching; overblanching can cause unnecessary losses in texture and flavor.

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BUILD FREEZER INGREDIENTS

Freeze food in the form you actually cook with: chopped peppers, measured tomato sauce, blanched beans, portioned berries, pesto cubes, soup vegetables. Future-you should be able to grab and cook.

04 Drying: remove the water, keep the usefulness

A dehydrator turns a bulky harvest into something compact and easy to store.

Drying preserves food by removing enough moisture to make growth of many spoilage organisms difficult. A food dehydrator gives much better control than hoping the weather cooperates.

- Dry herbs, fruit, vegetables and other foods using a tested method appropriate to that food.
- Slice or prepare pieces consistently so they dry at similar rates.
- Do not package warm dried food; trapped warmth can create condensation.
- Dried food can reabsorb moisture, so package it in clean, dry, moisture-resistant containers once it has cooled.
- If dried food develops mold, discard it rather than trying to rescue it.

OUTDOOR DRYING IS NOT UNIVERSAL

Research-based guidance does not recommend outdoor sun drying for vegetables or meats because weather cannot reliably control temperature, humidity and contamination. Controlled indoor drying is the safer choice for those foods.

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DRY WHAT REPLACES A PURCHASE

Herbs, soup vegetables, fruit snacks and flavoring powders are useful places to start. Do not dehydrate 20 pounds of something just because the dehydrator had empty trays.

05 Freeze-drying: powerful, expensive, specific.

It can preserve texture, flavor and long-term usefulness well - but the machine does not erase food-safety rules.

Home freeze-dryers remove water under vacuum after the food is frozen. They are excellent for certain foods and can create extremely dry products, but they are expensive and require packaging that protects the finished food from moisture and oxygen.

- Start with clean, sound food and follow your equipment manufacturer instructions.
- Freeze-drying does not make contaminated raw food magically safe. Handle raw meat, eggs and other higher-risk foods with the same care you would before preservation.
- Check that the batch is completely dry before long-term packaging.
- Package promptly in a way appropriate for very dry foods and the storage period you intend.
- Use the method because it solves a storage problem - not because owning a machine means every cucumber now needs a 25-year career.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

RESERVE IT FOR HIGH-VALUE BATCHES

Use a freeze-dryer for foods where weight, storage space, convenience or long storage actually matters. Freeze or eat the rest. Equipment should serve the harvest, not become its own full-time hobby.

06 Refrigerator preservation.

Not everything needs to survive a power outage to count as preserved.

Refrigerator pickles, sauces, pestos, jams and prepared foods can extend the useful life of a harvest without creating a shelf-stable product. The critical difference is that they remain refrigerated.

- A refrigerator pickle is not automatically interchangeable with a shelf-stable canned pickle recipe.
- Keep cold-preserved foods refrigerated and follow a tested or reputable recipe for ingredients and storage time.
- Use clean containers and avoid cross-contamination during preparation.
- Make manageable batches you can finish while quality is good.
- If a food smells wrong, shows mold, unusual gas, leaking, or other signs of spoilage, discard it.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

USE THE REFRIGERATOR AS A BRIDGE

When the harvest is coming faster than dinner, turn one portion into a refrigerated sauce, pickle or prepared ingredient. You buy yourself time without automatically committing to a canning session.

07 Fermentation: controlled biology, not vibes.

Fermentation is ancient. Food safety still deserves modern measurements.

Vegetable fermentation relies on microorganisms and carefully controlled ingredient proportions to develop acidity and inhibit dangerous organisms. That means this is not the place to casually reduce salt, change the food-to-brine ratio, or invent a shelf-storage plan.

- Use tested recipes with measured proportions of food, salt, vinegar or other ingredients when called for.
- Start with fresh, sound produce and clean equipment.
- Keep food submerged or managed exactly as the tested process specifies.
- Do not reduce salt in a fermented recipe unless a research-based source specifically provides that variation.
- Follow the tested recipe for fermentation conditions and final storage.

FLAVOR IS FLEXIBLE. SAFETY RATIOS ARE NOT.

You can choose a tested sauerkraut, pickle or fermented vegetable recipe that fits your taste. What you should not do is take a preservation formula and freestyle the proportions that make it safe.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

LEARN ONE FERMENT COMPLETELY

Pick one tested fermentation recipe and follow it start to finish. Learn what normal bubbling, aroma, texture and storage look like before turning the kitchen into a microbial jazz ensemble.

08 Canning: this is where exact matters.

Canning is safe when the recipe and process are research-tested. It is not a good place for creative math.

Home canning creates a sealed jar and, when done correctly, uses heat processing to control spoilage organisms and foodborne hazards. The required process depends on the acidity and density of the specific food.

- Use only current tested recipes from sources such as the National Center for Home Food Preservation, USDA, or a university cooperative extension using research-based guidance.
- Use the jar size, ingredient proportions, preparation method, processing time and canner type specified by the tested recipe.
- Make required altitude adjustments. Boiling temperature and pressure requirements change with elevation.
- Do not thicken, puree, add extra low-acid ingredients, or change acid proportions unless the tested recipe specifically allows it.
- Inspect jars after processing and storage. A sealed lid does not prove that an unsafe process became safe.

BOTULISM IS WHY WE DO NOT WING IT

Low-acid foods require pressure canning to reach temperatures needed to control botulism risk. A boiling-water canner is not a substitute for a pressure canner when the tested recipe requires pressure.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

BOOKMARK BEFORE HARVEST

Save nchfp.uga.edu and your trusted local cooperative extension preservation pages now. When 40 pounds of tomatoes arrive at once, that is not the moment to decide a random social-media recipe looks convincing.

09 Boiling-water vs. pressure canning.

The food decides the canner - not the equipment you happen to own.

Acid foods and properly acidified foods can be processed with methods designed for high-acid products. Low-acid foods require a pressure canner under a tested process because boiling-water temperatures are not sufficient for the same botulism control.

- High-acid examples include many fruits, jams, jellies and tested pickled products.
- Tomatoes require acidification when canned as acid foods according to current tested guidance.
- Low-acid vegetables, meats, poultry and mixtures containing substantial low-acid ingredients require pressure-canning processes when a tested canning recipe exists.
- An electric pressure cooker or small pressure saucepan should not be assumed to be an approved substitute for a pressure canner.
- Do not invent processing times by averaging two recipes or scaling a jar size up.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

LET THE RECIPE CHOOSE THE EQUIPMENT

Find the tested recipe first. Then gather the jar size, canner, lids, ingredients and processing information it requires. That order prevents most improvisation.

10 Some crops just want a cool, dry room.

The least processed food is sometimes the easiest food to preserve.

Garlic, onions, winter squash, potatoes, sweet potatoes and other storage crops may keep for weeks or months when harvested, cured and stored under the right conditions for that crop. Their needs are not identical.

- Cure crops when the crop-specific storage method calls for it before moving them into long-term storage.
- Separate damaged produce from sound produce so one problem does not spread through the whole harvest.
- Use breathable containers where airflow is part of the storage requirement.
- Keep crops that prefer different temperature or humidity conditions in separate locations when possible.
- Check storage regularly and use anything beginning to soften or decline before it becomes waste.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

CREATE AN EAT-FIRST BASKET

Keep imperfect but usable storage crops in one basket or crate. Use those first. Perfect bulbs and squash get the better long-term storage space.

11 Which method fits which harvest?

A starting point - then use crop-specific guidance for the exact process.

CROP	GOOD OPTIONS	WHAT TO REMEMBER
TOMATOES	Freeze / sauce / tested canning	Freezing is easy; canned products require tested recipes and acidification when specified.
PEPPERS	Freeze / dry / tested pickle	Choose based on how you cook; shelf-stable pickles need tested acidity and process.
GREEN BEANS	Blanch + freeze / pressure can	Low-acid: shelf-stable canning requires a tested pressure-canning recipe.
BERRIES	Freeze / dry / jam	Freeze whole or prepared; use tested recipes for canned jam.
HERBS	Dry / freeze / sauces	Preserve the form you actually use in cooking.
GARLIC	Cure + store / freeze in prepared forms	Whole bulbs store well when properly cured; do not store garlic-in-oil at room temperature.
WINTER SQUASH	Cure + store / freeze cooked	Good keeper when sound and properly cured.
CUCUMBERS	Refrigerator pickle / ferment / tested canning	Fresh cucumbers do not freeze well for crisp use.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

PRESERVE INGREDIENTS, NOT TROPHIES

Think about January meals. A measured bag of soup vegetables, dried herbs, frozen sauce, cured garlic, or a tested jar of salsa all solve different problems. Your pantry does not need matching aesthetics.

12 Label like you will forget everything.

Because by February, every red freezer bag is just a red freezer bag.

- Food or recipe name.
- Date preserved.
- Preservation method.
- Batch or recipe source for canned and fermented foods.
- Any important use note: blanched, already seasoned, contains sugar, hot peppers, etc.
- For freezer food, portion size or weight when it saves future measuring.

FIRST IN, FIRST OUT

Put newer food behind older food when practical. A preservation system works only if preserved food actually becomes meals before quality fades.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

KEEP ONE PRESERVATION INVENTORY

Use a notebook, spreadsheet, whiteboard or phone note. Record what went into the freezer, pantry and storage area. Cross it off as you use it. This is much cheaper than discovering three-year-old mystery sauce.

13 Know when to throw it out.

Preservation is supposed to reduce waste. It is not supposed to turn spoilage into a dare.

- Canned jar is leaking, bulging, spurting, foaming unexpectedly, unsealed, or shows visible spoilage.
- Dried food shows mold or has clearly reabsorbed moisture and spoiled.
- Refrigerated preserved food has mold, unusual slime, strong off odors, or other spoilage signs.
- Fermented food does not match the expected process or shows signs the tested recipe identifies as unsafe.
- Frozen food has thawed and spent an unknown amount of time at unsafe temperatures.
- You cannot identify what is in the container or how it was processed.

DO NOT TASTE-TEST SUSPICIOUS CANNED FOOD

Food contaminated with botulinum toxin may not look, smell or taste obviously spoiled. If a home-canned food was processed with an unsafe method or shows warning signs, do not taste it to find out.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

WRITE THE RECIPE SOURCE ON CANNED BATCHES

If you cannot trace a shelf-stable jar back to a tested recipe and process, you lose the information needed to judge whether it was safely preserved. Label the source when you make the batch.

14 Preservation day, minus the chaos.

Harvest first. Prioritize second. Process in batches.

- 1. SORT: separate perfect storage crops, immediate-use produce, preservation-quality produce and compost.
- 2. DECIDE: choose the fastest safe method that matches how you will use each food.
- 3. WASH / PREP: work in manageable batches instead of covering every counter at once.
- 4. PRESERVE: follow crop-specific or tested preservation guidance for the chosen method.
- 5. COOL / PACKAGE: allow foods to cool as required, package correctly and protect from moisture or air as appropriate.
- 6. LABEL: food, date, method, and recipe source where relevant.
- 7. STORE: freezer, refrigerator, pantry, cool storage or dehydrated-food storage according to the method.
- 8. CLEAN UP: because a kitchen full of sticky tomato equipment is how preserving becomes a once-a-decade hobby.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

USE THE TWO-HOUR TRIAGE

When a big harvest arrives, do the things that prevent loss first: refrigerate what needs cooling, cure what needs air, freeze the easiest items, and schedule the complicated preservation for a time when you can follow the process without rushing.

15 Preserve a garden, not a fantasy pantry.

A realistic mix of methods is usually more useful than choosing one identity and forcing everything into it.

TOMATO WEEK	Eat fresh. Freeze whole tomatoes for sauce. Make one tested canned product if you want shelf-stable jars.
PEPPER GLUT	Freeze chopped peppers. Dry hot peppers. Make a tested pickle or relish if that is something you actually eat.
HERB EXPLOSION	Dry sturdy herbs. Freeze tender herbs or blend into pesto / sauces for freezing.
GARLIC HARVEST	Cure sound bulbs for storage. Save the best for planting. Process damaged bulbs for near-term refrigerated or frozen use.
TOO MANY BERRIES	Freeze on trays, dry some, or use a tested jam recipe. Stop when the freezer has enough.
WINTER SQUASH	Cure and store sound fruit. Cook and freeze damaged or short-storage fruit first.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

SET A HOUSEHOLD PRESERVATION LIMIT

Decide how many jars, freezer bags, or storage crates your family realistically uses in a year. Once you hit the useful amount, donate, share, or eat the rest fresh. Preservation is not competitive hoarding.

KEEP THE FOOD. KEEP THE RULES THAT MATTER.

THE SHORT VERSION:

- Preserve what you actually eat.
- Freeze first if you want the simplest beginner method.
- Blanch vegetables using crop-specific research-based times.
- Dry food completely before packaging.
- Use tested proportions for fermentation.
- Use tested canning recipes exactly - including altitude adjustments.
- Low-acid foods require pressure-canning processes when canned.
- Label everything.
- When a preserved food is suspicious, throw it out.
- The goal is less waste and more useful food - not a pantry performance.

RESEARCH-BASED PRESERVATION SOURCES

- National Center for Home Food Preservation - nchfp.uga.edu
- USDA Complete Guide to Home Canning - available through USDA / NCHFP
- Your state or county Cooperative Extension home food preservation program