

Some tips on drying foods at home

By Jj Fallick

Drying is one of the oldest methods of food preservation still in use today. It is safe and can be quite economical. The nutritive value and palatability of dehydrated foods can range from the aptly-named “leather-breeches”—a dried green bean recipe from great grandma’s cookbook—to gourmet fruit leathers. It all depends on proper preparation.

Dehydrators

Your dehydrator can be a homemade solar model like we use, a commercial or homemade electric dryer or something as simple as racks laid in the sun, hung over the woodstove or even placed in a closed car sitting in the sun. I’ve used all these methods over the years, with varying success. Yes,

they all work...but they all have drawbacks as well.

We all know how a closed car can really heat up. If you have an extra vehicle sitting around, even just a hulk with closed windows, it can make a good food dryer. I accidentally coated the seat of my husbands logging truck with strawberry “goo” when my Sunshine Preserves tipped over! I never did get all the sticky sweetness out of the truck and Don spent the rest of the summer fighting off the bees when he went logging. Not the way to improve your marriage, I’d say!

Suspending trays over the wood stove or laying them across the sawhorses outdoors has never produced much trouble for me. These methods are dependent on heat from the stove or HOT sunny days. Here in Washington State we often don’t get many good drying days, but I used open air drying in western Colorado and southern California. DO cover your racks with cheesecloth or some

such gauzy fabric to keep the bugs off and bring the racks into the garage or house overnight if they aren’t done.

There are so many electric dehydrators on the market that I won’t go into detail about them. I will caution you to TURN ON any electric dehydrator before you buy it. Many have fans to circulate the heat—a good feature—but if you plan to operate the unit in the kitchen you don’t want a noisy one. Ours made such a racket that it drove me nuts even when I put it on the back porch!

Our homemade solar dryer came with the house. There are several similar ones in the area so I suspect they were built from plans that someone had. It is quiet, efficient and does a good job, now that I have plugged all the heat leaks. Of course, it doesn’t work when the sky is overcast or it’s raining and sometimes I have to end up with my food finishing off over the wood stove or by the propane oven’s pilot light.

Herbs

Herbs are the easiest food to dry. I don’t bother with the solar dehydrator for them, even here in the North. Laying herbs on racks in the sun for a day or two, at most, dries them well.

Table 1. Drying vegetables

VEGGIE	PREPARATION	PRE-TREATMENT	TO DRY
carrots	select tender, non-woody roots, trim tops and root end; slice 1/8 inch thick or dice	steam-blanch 8-10 min.	spread in thin layer, dry until tough and leathery
corn	use “good eating” variety, at tender stage, cut from cob after blanching	steam on cob 10-15 min. (until “milk” is set)	spread 1/2 inch deep, stir often, 6-10 hours to dry, done when hard and brittle
peas	young, tender peas; shell	steam 8-10 min. or dip in boiling water 3-4 min.	spread on trays, 6-10 hours shriveled and shatter when hit with hammer
summer squash	wash, slice 1/4 inch thick	steam 6 min.	spread in a thin layer, dry when brittle, EXCELLENT in soup
green beans	young, tender, wash	steam 8-10 min. or boiling water bath 3-4 min.	spread in thin layer, done when hard and brittle

Table 2. Drying fruit

FRUIT	PREPARATION	PRE-TREATMENT	TO DRY
apples	wash, peel, core, dice or slice up to ¼ inch thick, coat with ascorbic acid (2½ tsp. to 1 c. cold water)	soak 10-15 min. saline solution	arrange in thin layer, dry when leathery, no moisture when squeezed
apricots	wash, halve, pit, do NOT peel, coat with ascorbic acid (1 tsp. to 1 c. cold water)	soak 10-15 min. saline solution	lay on tray pit side up; done when leathery, no moisture when squeezed
nectarines	treat like apricots	treat like apricots	lay on tray pit side up; turn over when visible juice disappears. Done when leathery and somewhat pliable
peaches	use freestone, dry when ripe enough to eat but not fully ripe; peel, slice, pit; ascorbic acid like apricots	treat like apricots	arrange on tray in single layer, turn when visible juice disappears. Done when leathery and somewhat pliable
plums (prunes)	dry small ones, whole, large ones, halve and pit	blanch whole in boiling water 30 sec., halves, steam, blanch 15 min.	single layer, dry when pliable and leathery

As with all produce, pick at their peak of flavor, gently rinse off the dust and dry them. No pre- or post-treatment is necessary.

Vegetables

The next easiest foods to dry are vegetables. Onions and peppers (sweet or hot) can be dried with little preparation. Onions are peeled and either sliced or diced and peppers are washed and diced. Spread either in a single layer on the dryer rack. At 140 degrees, these foods require 6 to 10 hours to dry. When done, onions are brittle and peppers tough. If you want onion powder, crush the dry slices or dices before storing. I use both of these veggies in spaghetti sauce, soup and stew. For “quick” sauces I pre-soak the dices in boiling water for up to an hour and add water and reconstituted pieces to the sauce.

Other vegetables require blanching—as for freezing—before the dehydration process begins. To blanch, immerse small quantities of the food in rapidly boiling water or steam briefly. This stops the enzyme action and makes your finished product more nutritious, tasty, and better textured. Table 1 contains processing times and procedures for five commonly dried vegetables. This informa-

tion is excerpted from Extension Bulletin 0700, Washington State University, Pullman, WA. Vegetables also require a pasteurization process after drying if they have been sun or solar dried, if they are cut into small pieces or if there is ANY possibility of insect contamination. This will save you the grief of losing an entire jar of dried food later. To pasteurize, heat the veggies in a 150 degree oven for 30 minutes or at 175 degrees for 10 minutes. Cool thoroughly before packing into clean, dry, insect and moisture-proof containers. I use canning jars and recycled lids; this is an excellent use for recycled mayo jars too.

Fruit

Some fruits can be dried with little preparation. Others require some treatment to prevent darkening which changes the taste and can make the food unsightly. While it is possible to sulphur fruits at home, I don’t know anyone who does it. Most home processors use a saline solution (2-4 T. salt to 1 gal. water) or ascorbic acid solution to treat fruit. Pure ascorbic acid (available in pharmacies) is more effective than the commercial preparations which contain other ingredients and are used for freezing fruits.

Berries, cherries and grapes can be dried with no pre-treatment. They should be firm, free of stems, and whole (except for cherries, which may be pitted) and laid in a single layer on the trays. When they are done, berries will be dry and have no moisture when crushed. Cherries dry much like grape “raisins.” Table 2 contains processing options for a variety of other fruits.

Fruits must be “conditioned” and pasteurized. To condition, hold fruit in a sturdy, non-porous, nonaluminum container at room temperature in a well ventilated, protected area for a week. Stir the fruit daily. Then pasteurize in a 150 degree oven for 30 minutes or at 175 degrees for 15 minutes. Cool and store like dry vegetables.

Fruit leather

Fruit leather is an especially fun project. I use up the fruits that are a little too ripe to dry well whole or sliced, as fruit leather. You can make leather from virtually any fruit or combination you like. Wash and cut larger fruits into a saucepan until you have 2-2½ cups of fruit pieces. Heat over low flame until soft, then puree in a blender or run through a sieve. Add 1-2 T. of your favorite sweetener (to taste) and 1 tsp. lemon juice to light

colored fruits. Line your drying rack or a cookie sheet with sides with plastic wrap. Tape the wrap to the sides of the pan. Pour in the puree and distribute it evenly by gently tipping the sheet. Dry. Properly dried leathers will still feel sticky, but will peel easily from the plastic wrap. To store, roll up the cooled leather, plastic wrap and all, and store in a freezer bag, glass jar or other tightly sealed container. The leather is best if used within 3 months stored at room temperature but will keep up to six months under refrigeration, I'm told. I don't know ... I never could hide it well enough.

Why dehydrate?

Modern food processing methods have made drying the least common form of food preservation. Living in the backwoods, however, makes drying foods more desirable. Dehydrated food is easy to process and easy and cheap to store. Proper preparation and

storage of dried food can significantly affect the vitamin content of the foods. Recent research published in the Master Food Preserver Handbook (Washington State University Extension Service) shows us what can happen to the vitamin content of a fresh garden pea. When we eat the pea raw, fresh from the garden, we get 100% of the vitamin C. But cooking it, even fresh from the garden, reduces the vitamin C content to only 44% of the fresh vegetable. Comparatively, freezing, thawing and cooking leaves 39%, canning and reheating, 36%, freeze-drying and rehydrating, 35% and dehydration and cooking leaves only 25% of the original vitamin C content. This is not a put-down of stored food. We cannot always eat fresh from the garden, and even "fresh" foods from the supermarket lose nutrition in the weeks of storage and shipping that bring them to northern tables. Processing your food fresh

from the garden and using up-to-date methods maximizes nutrient retention. Blanching and pasteurizing minimize overall nutrient loss in dried foods. When you cook your vegetables in minimal amounts of water and include that water in your diet as liquid in soup, stew, gravy, or sauce you catch vitamins we used to throwaway. Store your dry products at a low temperature in a dry place, sealed tightly in nonporous containers to maximize vitamin retention.

I use dried fruits and vegetables often in the winter to supplement my canned and cellared products. Since I can't have a home freezer, my stores of dried peppers, spinach, zucchini and onions show up often in winter soups and stews. In fact, my kids prefer when I use dry spinach and zucchini in soup. They don't cook up like their fresh or frozen counterparts and are therefore easier to fish out of the bowl! Δ

What a great gift idea for any occasion!

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