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Buffalo County Extension
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Preserving Tomatoes

Have an over-abundance of tomatoes? There are a variety of ways to preserve them to enjoy this winter. Tomatoes can be preserved by canning, drying, freezing, or pickling. They can also be used in creating fruit spreads like jams, jellies, and marmalades.

Only boiling water or pressure canning methods are recommended for canning foods. Older methods, such as oven canning and open-kettle canning, have been discredited and can be hazardous. The risk of botulism poisoning determines the choice of either boiling water or pressure canners for canning foods. In foods that are acid (pH 4.6 or lower) the microorganism that causes botulism cannot grow. Therefore, it is safe to use a boiling water canner. All other foods must be canned using tested pressure canning processes.

Tomatoes for many years were considered high acid. However, new varieties and over-mature fruits may have a pH greater than 4.6. The USDA and University-based researchers have determined that to ensure a safe acid level for boiling water canning of whole, crushed, or juiced tomatoes, add 2 tablespoons of bottled lemon juice or ½ teaspoon of citric acid per quart of tomatoes. For pints, use 1 tablespoon of bottled lemon juice or ¼ teaspoon of citric acid. Acid can be added directly to the jars before filling the jars with product. Add sugar to offset acid taste, if desired. Four tablespoons of 5-percent-acidity vinegar per quart may be used instead of lemon juice or citric acid. However, vinegar may cause undesirable flavor changes.

Frozen tomatoes will have a soft texture when thawed and are suitable only for cooking, i.e. in soups, stews, spaghetti sauces, etc. Tomato products, such as sauce, puree, catsup, and chili sauce, can be frozen. Prepare as usual, cool rapidly, pack into rigid containers leaving a headspace, and freeze.

Tomatoes are an excellent food to dry. They do not need blanching and are dried to a crisp. When drying, the key is to remove moisture as quickly as possible at a temperature that does not seriously affect the flavor, texture, and color of the tomatoes.

The safety concerns of pickled tomatoes are the same as those for canning tomatoes. A pH below 4.6 must be achieved before a food can be safely canned in a boiling water canner. When pickling, commercially prepared vinegar is typically added to achieve the necessary acidity. Do not alter vinegar, food, or water proportions in a recipe or use vinegar with unknown acidity. Use only recipes with tested proportions of ingredients. There must be a minimum, uniform level of acid throughout the mixed product to prevent the growth of botulinum bacteria.

Tomato jams, jellies, and marmalades also depend on acid levels to make them a safe product. Only use tested recipes and do not alter any of the acid, sugar, or tomato proportions in the recipe.

Think safety when planning to preserve tomatoes. There are many tested procedures and recipes available for tomatoes. Creating original procedures and recipes could result in a hazardous product, since the pH range of tomatoes is on the borderline between acid and low-acid foods.

For detailed information on home food preservation go to www.food.unl.edu/canning-freezing-and-drying or contact Nebraska Extension in Buffalo County, 1400 East 34th Street, Kearney, NE 68847 or call (308) 236-1235.