

After the Harvest

Preserving your Bounty for the Winter

How to Plan Your Garden for Canning and Preserving

— By Kate McCarty, Food Systems Professional,
University of Maine Cooperative Extension

Early spring is a great time to plan your garden for the upcoming season. This year, plan to grow a little extra so you can preserve fresh vegetables for later use. Plan ahead and plant vegetables that are easy to can and freeze, like cucumbers for pickling, tomatoes, and green beans.

To decide what to grow, think about what you/your family likes to eat, what is expensive to buy at the grocery store, and what you normally buy that you can grow and preserve instead. In the spring, purchase seeds or seedlings from your local garden center or farmers' market and watch your harvest grow.

Tomatoes

Tomatoes are great for canning or freezing whole, cut into pieces, or as a sauce. In Maine, tomatoes need to be planted as seedlings in order to produce fruit before the first frost in the fall. Buy a paste or sauce tomato variety from the garden center or farmers' market. These varieties, often called San Marzano or Roma tomatoes, have thicker skins, which makes them easier to peel, and have less water in the flesh, which makes for a thicker tomato sauce.

Cucumbers

Cucumbers can be planted from seed and are especially fun to grow with kids. For best results when canning, plant a pickling cucumber variety—these cucumbers have thicker skins and less water in the flesh, which will result in a crispier pickle. Salad or slicing varieties are not suited for pickling. These varieties will produce limp, soft pickles that are not good for eating. Pickling cucumbers can also be eaten fresh in salads or as a snack.

If you're not ready to take the leap to canning your own pickles just yet, refrigerator pickles are a safe and tasty alternative—follow our guide to making your own refrigerator pickles for a quick and easy project.

Green Beans

Green beans can also be planted from seed. Grow extra green beans to freeze or pickle with garlic and dill to make dilly beans. Purple beans are fun to grow, but be aware that they lose their color when cooked.

Herbs

Herbs add flavor to your cooking and preserving, and growing your own at home is a great cost saver. Plant dill, oregano, basil, cilantro, and garlic for use in homemade pickles, salsa, and tomato sauce. Herbs can be grown from seed or seedlings either in the garden or containers. Fresh herbs can be used fresh in place of dried herbs in a canning recipe or can be dried to store and use as needed. Herbs are easy to dry—either by hanging to air-dry or using the microwave to dry small amounts of herbs.

We recommend you start small, see how it goes, and incorporate what you learn into your garden planning next spring. We've seen too many enthusiastic gardeners plant too much produce and get overwhelmed come harvest time. While every year in the garden is different, with a little planning in the spring, you'll lay the groundwork for a successful season of canning and preserving your garden harvest.

Link:

<https://extension.umaine.edu/food-health/2023/03/16/how-to-plan-your-garden-for-canning-preserving/>

Season Extension

Season extension is exactly what it means. Now for most backyard home gardeners, there are three ways to take this.

- Extending the warm season crops into the shoulder months
 - Extending the cool season crops into the winter months
- Or both!

Okay, not every home garden will have space for doing both, because a tomato takes up space that could otherwise be occupied by a block of lettuce, and vice versa.

While many will use season extension to give their tomatoes a head start, I prefer to use my season extension for cool-season crops. These are the forgotten vegetables, like spinach, lettuce, carrots, kale, cabbage, and many more! Everyone grows a tomato, but few gardeners grow delicious cool-season crops. Fall gardening is my favorite. As the weather cools the plants use sugars to avoid freezing, leading to much sweeter produce. Add in the cooler weather and fewer pests make it a joy to be in the garden.

We are not talking about greenhouses. Greenhouses typically use active heating. Meaning there is some type of heat source in the structure. What we will talk about is passive heating by trapping sunlight in various types of structures, such as cloches, cold frames, and low tunnels.



Cloches

Cloches are simply plastic jugs or bottles with the bottom cut off and placed over the top of plants. These are inexpensive ways to protect plants. There are all types of variations on cloches, from gardeners using an old milk jug, to cloches with waterfilled sides that hold a lot more heat. Vent on warm sunny days by removing the cap. However, since these are so small it can only hold so much thermal mass. Meaning it will cool far more quickly than a larger structure.



Cold Frames

A cold frame is essentially a bottomless box, with a clear covering. Ideally, cold frame tops are angled and oriented to the southern sky for better interception of sunlight. Plants can grow directly in the soil inside the cold frame, or plants can be grown in flats or pots.

Cold frame construction - Often these are made of wood 1-inch thick; two-inch is more costly but provides better insulative value. I have seen these made of brick, concrete block, straw bales, or sunken below grade. Most cold frames have a repurposed window as the clear covering. You can also use plastic greenhouse film and clear polycarbonate panels. If you love the details, the slope of the covering should be 1 inch per foot from back to front to get the best angle for the sun's rays.

Vent cold frames on warm, sunny days by propping the covering. There are some simple automatic vent openers available that do not require electricity. These have a metal cylinder containing compressed wax that expands when heated. As the wax expands, it pushes a piston that opens the vent. As the temperature cools the wax contracts and the spring closes the vent.



Low Tunnels

Low tunnels offer a very flexible low-cost way to provide a protected growing environment to crops. The frame of the low tunnel can be made from a variety of materials. But are usually 10 to an eight-foot-long stick of metal conduit, PVC, or high gauge wire, which are bent into 3, 4, or 6-foot half-circle frames, called hoops.

A note on using PVC pipe – PVC reacts with the greenhouse polyethylene film and quickly degrades where these two materials come in contact. Several poly suppliers will not guarantee their product if PVC is used for the hoops.

The hoops are spaced at a maximum of six feet apart. Space hoops closer if you are in a high wind or area that receives lots of snow. You can secure the hoops to a raised bed frame with pipe straps/clamps. For in-ground gardens, you can push the ends of the hoop into the ground. I also install a rope along the center of the hoops to act as a spine. Stakes at either end of the low tunnel secure a rope looped around the middle of each hoop and pulled tightly. This helps with resisting wind and snow loads.

There are two types of material you can use a low tunnel covering and I like to use both. Spun row cover fabric and greenhouse polyethylene.

Row cover fabric is a plastic spun fiber material. It is porous which means it will let air and some amounts of water through, in addition to light. Row cover is what I first install earlier in the fall as temperatures begin to cool. It will provide adequate protection as nights begin to dip towards freezing.

It is also handy to use in the spring as a protective cover for plants as pest insect populations begin to grow.

Some growers and gardeners will use row cover all season to keep pests off crops that don't require pollination, such as salad greens, turnips, broccoli, potatoes, and many others. For those crops that do require pollination, the row cover can remain on until the plant begins to flower. This can provide protection early in the season from pests like squash bugs or squash vine borer.

Greenhouse polyethylene - As temperatures continue to drop in the fall, time will come to put on added winter protection in the form of greenhouse polyethylene (poly). This plastic film will only allow light through. Which for the most part will become trapped underneath as heat energy. Ten-foot wide rolls of poly should accommodate most low tunnel hoops. The taller the hoops, the more poly it takes to span the width of the bed.

Bed lengths vary in most gardens. Simply cut the poly to fit your bed length. Remember to account for several extra feet on either end due to the height of the hoops and to secure the plastic with block or sandbags.

Even though I was harsh on high tunnels at the beginning, a lot of home gardeners, especially those in the northern US, are putting in small high tunnels in their yards to extend their growing season.

There is so much more to consider when it comes to season extension. If you want to learn more check out my recorded season extension webinar at https://go.illinois.edu/Season_Extension

Good Growing Tip: If you are using a plastic covering on your garden, make sure it is treated to withstand outdoor conditions. Your typical plastic drop cloth will quickly degrade when exposed to UV light and other abrasive environmental conditions.

harvest

noun [C or U]

the time of year when crops are cut and collected from the fields, or the activity of cutting and collecting them, or the crops that are cut and collected.

(Cambridge Dictionary)

OVERVIEW

There are lots of ways to use up your home-grown harvests if you have a glut and there's too much for you to eat all at once – many fruit and vegetable crops can be preserved in a range of different methods. It's very satisfying to see your shed, cupboards and freezer stocked up with home-grown produce, and it will also save you money, helping to feed the family through the leaner, colder months.

It is important to pick all fruit and vegetables in their prime and discard any that are damaged in any way. Chill perishable crops, such as berries and stone fruits, if you can't process them straight away. Don't wash newly harvested vegetables until just before preserving, as this can encourage the growth of bacteria.

Here are range of techniques that you can use to preserve your harvest.

Storing in a cool place

Several root veg and top fruits can be stored in a cool, well-ventilated spot, such as a shed or garage. Don't store root crops in a very dry place, or they will shrivel. Use within six months.

•Suitable for: potatoes, carrots, parsnips, onions, pears and apples.

Freezing

Low temperatures inhibit the growth of bacteria. Blanching before freezing also kills bacteria and maintains the vitamin content. Use within six months.

Suitable for: root crops, onions, apples, pears, plums, raspberries, gooseberries, currants, tomatoes, pods, sweetcorn, brassicas.

Fermenting

Not only is fermenting a great way to preserve vegetables, but it's also a great way to make delicious food, such as sauerkraut and kimchi. Furthermore, fermented foods are easy to digest and are filled with beneficial bacteria (probiotics) that help your body digest food more easily, boost your immune system, and keep you healthy!

What's more, getting started with fermented food is easier than you think. If you've ever wanted to create your own dill pickles, sauerkraut, kombucha, and other amazing foods, these fermentation kits are a perfect choice.

Drying

Drying out food prevents bacteria from multiplying and intensifies flavour. You can buy a dehydrator, use an oven on a low heat, or hang some crops on a string. Use within six months.

Suitable for: onions, apples, pears, plums, tomatoes, raspberries, strawberries, pods and cobs

Canning and Jarring

Canning and jarring are a great way to preserve the freshness of summer fruits and vegetables when they are at their peak. Canning involves heating and cooling food in jars or cans to kill harmful bacteria and create a vacuum seal. It's called canning because of the jars or cans that are used during the process.

When properly done, canning is an easy way to keep foods fresh for much longer than you would otherwise get out of them. It's important to use fresh, high-quality, and safe ingredients for canning.

Dehydrate

Dehydrating is another way to preserve many vegetables from the garden. It's one of the oldest methods of preserving vegetables and fruits. It uses heat to evaporate moisture and air to carry it away. Dehydrated foods take up less space than frozen or canned foods because water has been removed. Some vegetables suitable for dehydration include carrots, celery, corn, green beans, potatoes, and tomatoes. Furthermore, dehydrated vegetables are a tasty, nutritious alternative to frozen or canned vegetables. They store compactly and can be used in various ways—you can add them to soups and stews, mix them into salads, enjoy them as snacks, or even use them as garnishes.

Leaving vegetables in the ground to preserve them

Hardy root crops such as turnips, rutabagas, beets, and carrots can be left in the ground over the winter and harvested as needed. If you're concerned about them freezing in the ground during particularly harsh winters, straw or dry leaves can be placed over them to insulate them from the cold. You may need to wrap them in burlap or some other material that will keep out moisture, but this is totally optional!

Jams, Jellies and Preserves

Jams, jellies, and preserves are some of our best out of season treats that save spring and summer fruit harvests. Making homemade jam and other preserves is an easy process, but it does require some knowledge on how to can properly. Once you know how to make jam and how to make jelly, you can enjoy your bumper crops all year around.

Making Chutney

This quintessential preserving method uses sugar, salt and vinegar, combined with cooking the fruit or vegetables over a low heat for several hours. Use up within a year.

Suitable for: apples, marrows, courgettes, apricots, beans, beetroot, cauliflower, onions, quince, rhubarb and tomatoes.

Pickling

Vinegar or brine preserve the produce. Sliced or chopped vegetables are sprinkled with coarse salt. Vinegar and spices are brought to the boil and once hot, poured over the rinsed vegetables.

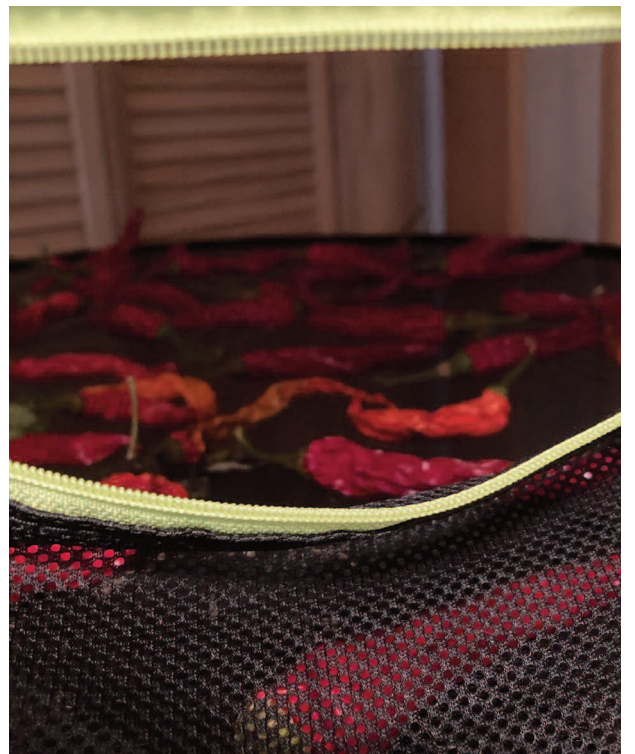
Suitable for: beetroot, courgettes, cucumbers, grapes, pears, peppers, plums and shallots.

Flavored Vinegars

Fruit, veg or herbs are steeped in vinegar over a period. The strained liquid is then heated with sugar and poured into sterilised containers.

Suitable for: apples, blackberries, blueberries, garlic, mint, peppers, raspberries, strawberries and tarragon.





Recommended Publications

BOOKS

STOCKING UP

BY THE EDITORS OF FARMING AND GARDENING
RODALE PRESS

PRESERVING THE HARVEST

ANN ACCETTE-SCOTT
LYONS PRESS

THE COMPLETE BOOK OF SMALL-BATCH PRESRVING

ELLIE TOPP AND MARGARET HOWARD
FIREFLY

12 MONTHS HARVEST

MARIEL DEWEY
ORTHO BOOKS

BALL BOOK OF HOME PRESERVING

BY JUDI KINGRY , LAUREN DEVINE , ET AL
ROBERT ROSE PUBLISHING

THE SELF SUFFICIENCY HANDBOOK

ALAN AND GILL BRIDGEWATER
SKYHORSE PUBLISHING

THE HAVE MORE PLAN

ED AND CAROLYN ROBINSON
STOREY PUBLISHING

MAGAZINES

COUNTRYSIDE & SMALL STOCK JOURNAL

WWW.IAMCOUNTRYSIDE.COM

BACKWOODS HOME MAGAZINE

WWW.BACKWOODSHOME.COM

Suggested Seed & Supply Sources

www.johnnyseeds.com
1-877-564-6697

www.highmowingseeds.com
802-472-6174

www.seedsavers.org
563-382-5990

www.fedcoseeds.com
207-426-0090

www.hudsonvalleyseed.com
845-204-8769

www.dixondalefarms.com
830-876-2430

www.harriseseeds.com
800-544-7938

www.noltsgrowerssupplies.net
717-656-9764

www.growerssupply.com.net
1-800-476-9715