



preserving food



sage and thyme drying in the kitchen – recycled jars are used for storage

what is it?

To many, preserving food means extending 'shelf-life' by bunging our processed supermarket purchases into the fridge, freezer or kitchen cupboard for up to the recommended time. But is this the best way to obtain and store food? We now take this processing for granted, because we've got used to it being done for us. We've lost track of the original reasons, like extending availability of local fresh produce, minimising waste and keeping costs down. Much modern processing is made necessary by the distance food is transported, the time it takes to reach us, and our desire for the same choices all the year round. But take a closer look at your shopping. Even in the most basic weekly basket you will find many methods of preservation, some of which, like smoking or drying, have been around for thousands of years. Some methods of preserving food – modern and traditional:

high-tech / high-energy: refrigeration, freezing, canning, bottling, freeze-drying, pasteurisation, sterilization, distillation, drying (oven)

low-tech / low-energy: fermentation, pickling (vinegar), dehydration, juices & cordials, with sugar / honey, smoking, salting, in alcohol, in oil, drying (solar oven)

no-tech / no-energy: dry storage, root cellaring, hanging, clamping, drying (natural)

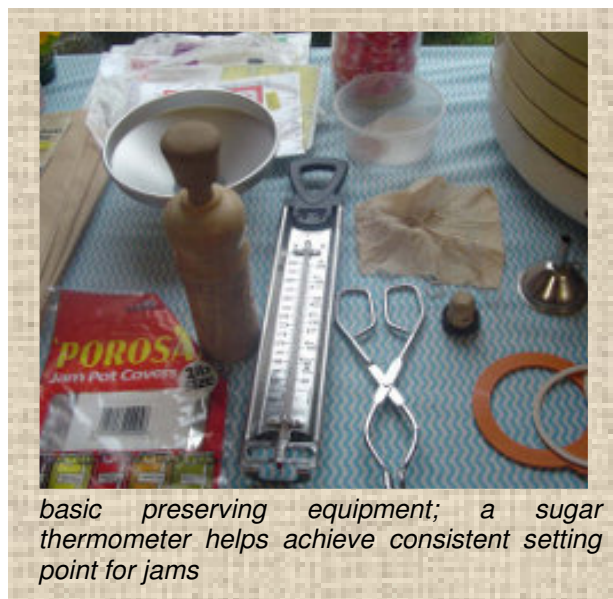
Arguably, home preservation of food in the UK reached its peak in the 19th century. Many methods were developed to maximise the benefits of produce from kitchen gardens at farms and manor houses, as a means of storing good quality produce, or to deal with surpluses, or poorer quality produce. Traditions have been kept going within households, by organisations such as the Women's Institute and numerous cookbooks.

what are the benefits?

Traditional preservation techniques offer an alternative to bland supermarket produce. Most ingredients that you find in a ready-meal will store for longer than the processed product, and retain more nutrients, so contributing to a healthier diet. Preserving at home is also fun, rewarding and educational – bringing us closer to our food and helping understand the consequences of modern food consumerism, particularly transport, energy use and waste.

reducing waste: preserved food can be used as required, with no wastage. Apart from the land use and environmental issues, wasting food is pretty scandalous in a world where many people don't have enough to eat. The following information on food wastage is from WRAP's Love Food Hate Waste campaign:

- in the UK we throw away one third of the food we buy. That's like one in three bags of food shopping going straight in the bin
- we throw away 6.7 million tonnes of food each year in the UK; most of this food could have been eaten (and it's not just peelings and bones – it's good food). That's equivalent to filling Wembley Stadium with food waste 8 times over!
- producing, storing and getting the food to our homes uses a lot of energy. If we stopped wasting all this food, it would save the equivalent of at least 18 million tonnes of CO₂. That's like taking 1 in 5 cars off UK roads
- most of this food reaches landfill sites where it emits methane, a powerful greenhouse gas
- high economic cost: at least £10 billion worth of food that could have been eaten is thrown out



basic preserving equipment; a sugar thermometer helps achieve consistent setting point for jams



every year - that's c. £400 per UK household

- we throw food out for two main reasons: 1) we cook or prepare too much, costing us around £4 billion per year; 2) and we let food go off, either completely untouched, or opened/started but not finished, costing £6 billion per year

reducing energy use: there are two main ways that home food preservation can save energy (and its associated emissions):

- many food preservation techniques use very little or no energy, when the alternative is fridges/freezers, that do
- we can preserve the main crop in the autumn, so that we can have unseasonal food in winter and spring, instead of flying it around the world

It may feel as if it will restrict choice, but in fact it offers different choices, and there's a great feeling of satisfaction in serving up a home-produced meal, or giving a jar of preserve as a present.

what can I do?

As you can see, there's a lot more to it than just jams and chutneys. Have a look at the list of methods above. We can't all do them all, but we can all do some, and many of them take little effort and save time, money and energy. It can be as simple as setting aside a shelf or hanging space in the shed, garage or cellar for storing in-season fruit or vegetables such as apples or marrows. Ideally, you could grow your own, but if not then buy local in-season produce to store fresh or preserve. Visit a pick-your-own farm or harvest wild food or benefit from that abandoned fruit tree. Try asking for waste food at your local greengrocer – often they will give it away. Don't forget that many preservation methods evolved out of the Victorian practices of storing good quality produce (e.g. fruit for jam), or dealing with surpluses (e.g. cider or juice from apples), or poorer quality produce (green tomato chutney). On the whole, traditional methods save energy, so use them whenever possible, and if you are going to freeze, (or your fridge needs replacing) remember to use an energy-efficient appliance, preferably A++.

If you are into jam/chutney making, or bottling, get the right basic equipment, such as a good maslin pan, straining muslin and sugar thermometer, and as well as re-using jam jars etc, keep a look out for second-hand preserving jars. And don't forget

the importance of hygiene, both to the shelf-life of your product and those going to eat it!

So much choice you don't know where to start? Follow the links in the resources section below, or visit our online bookshop, where you'll find something on everything from clamping root vegetables to building your own solar food dryer. Better still, why not come on a one-day preserving food course, which will give you a good mix of theory and practice. Not in a position to do any of this? At least look at your surplus or waste food. If you can't avoid creating it, or can't store it, keep it out of landfill by composting it or feeding it to chickens, or pressure your local council for food waste disposal provision.

resources

- LILI have a course, links to information and suppliers' sites, and a range of books, including:
- *How to Store Your Garden Produce*, Piers Warren
- *Preserving Food Without Freezing or Canning*, Deborah Madison
- *Good Old-fashioned Jams, Preserves & Chutneys*, Sara Paston-Williams
- stason.org/TULARC/food/preserving - huge FAQ page about preserving
- vigopresses.co.uk – fruit presses and food preserving equipment
- uga.edu/nchfp – US site with lots of info
- preservefood.com – ditto
- lovefoodhatewaste.com – campaigning against wasting food



harvest your carrots and keep them in damp sand in a cool place to last the whole winter

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