

Putting Up the Harvest by Birgitt Evans

In 2010, interest in growing food has increased dramatically, and with so many new gardeners now harvesting their crops, it is a good time to talk about what to do with all that food.

Since you may have grown more than you can possibly eat, in addition to vowing to plant less next year, consider some other options for your produce. You can share it with friends and neighbors, trade it for something you didn't grow, give it to a local food pantry (Ample Harvest www.ampleharvest.org maintains a nationwide directory of food pantries) or put it up for the winter. With a little research and planning, you can enjoy the fruits of your labors for months to come.

Putting up food can be as easy as keeping apples, pumpkins, winter squash, garlic or potatoes in a cool, dry basement or cupboard to use through the winter. Save only quality produce in good condition. Keep it dry and check frequently for any spoiled fruit.

You can also dry a number of fruits and herbs. Most herbs can be dried by hanging them upside down in bunches in a cool, dry, dark place. Fruits like apples, figs, apricots, tomatoes and zucchini can be dried in a food dehydrator, in oven turned on low or in the sun in warm locations. (If you are sun drying, be sure to cover fruits to keep out insects.) Fruits should be leather hard, but still flexible when done and should be stored in bags in a dark, dry place or in the freezer.

Freezing is another good way to save summer bounty. You can freeze most fruits and vegetables. To freeze corn, beans or tomatoes, blanch them in boiling water for 60 seconds and transfer them immediately to cold water. Cut the kernels off the corn, cut up the beans and skin the tomatoes. Corn and beans can go directly into freezer bags. Wet fruits like tomatoes and strawberries are best frozen on cookie sheets and then transferred to freezer bags so that they stay separate and you can pull out as many as you need. To freeze chile or sweet peppers, roast them, peel and seed them and place them in freezer bags.

To put up large amounts of produce, you can make and can jams, preserves, pickles, tomato sauces, salsas and a wide variety of other products. Unfortunately, the art of canning seems to have been lost and many people approach it with great trepidation. However, it is not that difficult and, with a few pieces of specialized equipment – canning jars, new lids, a canning funnel, a jar lifter and a boiling-water canner – you can put up many products. But first you should do some judicious reading on the subject.

Visit the USDA's National Center for Home Food Preservation at www.uga.edu/nchfp/publications/publications_usda.html for detailed information about canning, drying and freezing many products.

I have always found not only eating it fresh but preserving my harvest to be the most rewarding part of growing my own food.

Birgitt Evans is a University of California Master Gardener. For more information on Alameda County Master Gardeners, visit our newly redesigned website <http://groups.ucanr.org/ACMG/> and check out the page "Growing Your Own Food".