

News Column for Week of May 8, 2017

Kathy S. McEwan  
Southwind Extension District  
Family & Consumer Sciences

### **When preserving food at home, food safety should be top priority**

Ripe tomatoes and fresh fruit may be months away, but home canning of these and other foods requires planning and preparation, even ahead of the planting.

“We recommend that you try to can or preserve what you think you're going to be using within the next year,” said K-State Research and Extension food safety specialist Karen Blakeslee. “Check your basement, check your freezer, take inventory what you have and then go from there.”

The three most common forms of food preservation are freezing, drying and canning. Blakeslee said freezing is the easiest, but water bath canning is not that difficult, if directions are followed.

“It's basically a big pot of water, a rack and a lid — that's all the equipment you need,” she said. “Water bath canning works well for acidic foods like tomato products, jams and jellies.”

If using a pressure canner, whether it's your first year or 20th year, gauges need to be checked for accuracy. Brands of pressure canner gauges that can be tested are by our offices are Presto, National Pressure Cooker Company, Magic Seal, and Maid of Honor. To have your gauge tested, bring the pressure cooker lid with the gauge still attached to the extension office. The testing device connects to the lid, not just the gauge. If your gauge is off — high or low — from what their master gauge says, by more than two pounds, it is recommended you replace it.

Blakeslee said other parts of a canner need regular inspections, too.

“If you have a rubber gasket on your pressure canner, make sure it's still pliable — it's not cracked or dried out,” she said. “Check the little rubber safety plugs. Make sure that the vent stem is clear so it's not plugged up with any food debris.”

A well-maintained canning jar can be reused several times, provided it's kept free of cracks, chips and scratches. Blakeslee cautioned that lids should be used only once. She added that consumers may see some new jar designs on the shelf this year with the older jars that are being phased out.

One new item that Blakeslee is skeptical about is the electric pressure cooker, an appliance that has become popular within the past couple of years. Blakeslee cautions consumers who want to use these for home canning. “The canning process is very driven by what temperature you get your products to,” she said, “and with these new pressure cookers, we just don't know. Some of the newer recipes call for a specific temperature, and these electric pressure cookers don't always provide that information.”

If proper temperatures and/or pressures are not met, the canned food could become contaminated with a germ that causes botulism, a potentially fatal illness. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has a page devoted to home canning and botulism.

One strategy to reduce the risk of foodborne illness is to avoid outdated publications, cookbooks and recipes. When it comes to recipes, Blakeslee says consumers should stick to recipes published in 1994 or later.

“In 1994, the USDA changed a lot of their testing and their recommendations on how food should be safely canned,” she explained. “If you're using random recipes you've found online, or even older recipes passed down through your family, those may not be safe. So we recommend tested recipes from the USDA, Extension resources, or even the Ball Company. Ball has published cookbooks that have lots of great recipes.”

More helpful information on safe home canning and food preservation can be found at you Southwind extension offices. Blakeslee will be hosting a series of food-preservation workshops across Kansas during the month of May. The [“Preserve It Fresh, Preserve It Safe”](#) website has the current schedule, as well as links to publications, videos and more.

For more questions, contact Kathy at 620-365-2242 or by email at [kmcewan@ksu.edu](mailto:kmcewan@ksu.edu).