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Time to get ready for canning season

Fresh pickles, ripe tomatoes and other garden goodies may still be months away, but if you plan on canning those foods, now's a good time to check on your supplies.

And if that includes buying a new canner, Kansas State University food safety specialist Karen Blakeslee says there is a lot to think about before selecting a canner.

"The first thing to think about is what kind of cooktop do you have on your stove," said Blakeslee, who is also the director of the university's Rapid Response Center. "The cooktop is going to dictate what type of canner you're going to get."

She said most canners will work on a gas stove, or a coil-type stove. But the newer, smooth top stoves could create some problems with some canners.

"Some of the smooth top stoves have automatic shutoffs on them if they get too hot," which could mean the food is not properly heated and thus preserved, according to Blakeslee.

"The other thing to think about is the weight that you're putting on that stove top. Canners are heavy, and when you add water and full jars of food, that increases weight, and you could end up cracking your stove top because of the weight and the heat."

She recommends following the stove manufacturer's recommendations for using canners on a smooth stovetop.

"There are some canners that I would not recommend using on a smooth top surface," Blakeslee said. "One example is a water bath canner like the old Granite-Ware, which are speckled blue or black enamel canners. Many people have them and they work great, but the problem with those is they have the bumpy bottoms. On a smooth cook top surface, you do not get maximum heat contact from the burner into the canner, so it takes forever to heat up water."

Blakeslee, who teaches classes on canning through K-State Research and Extension offices in the state, suggests a stainless steel water bath canner sold by the Ball company that has a flat bottom. Presto is another company that says its product can be used on a smooth top, but Blakeslee says "make sure that your burner is as large as possible."

She adds that the bottom of the canner should not extend beyond the burner more than one inch to get maximum heat transfer from the burner into the canner.

Canners sold by All American and Mirro warn consumers not to use them on a smooth cook top.

“An alternative to using your stove top for water bath canners is an electric water bath canner sold by the Ball company,” Blakeslee said. “This is a stand-alone canner; it has its own heater/burner system and is separate from your stove, so you don’t have to worry about what kind of canner to use on top of your stove.

“This is a good investment if you do a lot of water bath canning. It can also be used for general cooking such as making soup or stew.”

Blakeslee has some other timely tips leading up to canning season:

Use a canner that is recommended for the type of food you want to can. “If you’re canning plain vegetables, like green beans, you have to use a pressure canner because green beans are low acid foods,” she said. “Plain vegetables like green beans, carrots, corn, even meat...those types of foods must be pressure canned.”

She added that you can use a water bath canner for such foods as fruits, jams, jellies and pickles.

“A pressure canner can be used like a water bath canner. Just leave the weight off so pressure is not applied,” Blakeslee said.

Have your dial gauge tested. Southwind Extension offers this service for free. Gauge brands that can be tested include Presto, National, Magic Seal and Maid of Honor dial gauge pressure canners.

“Check dial gauges every year so you know how accurate the gauge is reading,” she said.

Check your canning supplies. The food safety specialist says you should check to make sure jars are not scratched or chipped and that the rims of jars are not damaged. A damaged jar could crack inside a canner, “and that’s not good,” she said.

Other supplies you may need to have in stock include pectin for jams and jellies; lemon juice or citric acid for tomatoes; and other supplies that vary based on the type of food you plan to can.

“We want you to be smart and safe when it comes to home canning,” Blakeslee said. “It’s a great way to preserve produce you grow or buy from a farmer’s market. Be smart about how you’re canning food. While there are some things that haven’t changed over the years, there are some procedures and methods that have changed, so make sure you’re up to date on what you’re doing when it comes to home canning.”

As part of our *Grow It Prepare It* series, I will be offering preservation classes in Iola beginning May 9 with *Preservation 101*. This class is a pre-requisite for the other “hands-on” classes to follow. For more information or to register for the *Preservation 101* class, call Kathy at 620-365-2242. Class details are available on the Southwind District website at www.southwind.kus.edu.

