

Preparing for Preserving: Check Your Equipment and Use Safe Recipes

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As gardens begin producing and farmers markets fill with fresh produce, many southeast Kansans are preparing for another food preservation season. Before canning begins, it's important to take a few steps to make sure equipment is safe and working properly.

One of the most important checks involves pressure canners. The Southwind Extension District offices in Erie, Yates Center, Iola, and Fort Scott offer free pressure canner gauge testing. The process can help ensure home-canned foods are processed safely. Contact your local office to arrange to leave your pressure canner lid or make an appointment for it to be checked while you wait.

Pressure canning is required for low-acid foods such as vegetables, meats, and soups. An accurate gauge is critical because improper processing can allow the growth of harmful bacteria, including *Clostridium botulinum*, which causes botulism—a serious and potentially deadly foodborne illness.

Pressure canners use either a dial gauge or a weighted gauge. Weighted-gauge canners do not require testing. However, dial gauges should be tested annually for accuracy. Southwind Extension offices use the Presto Testing Unit from National Presto Industries and can test gauges from National, Presto, Maid of Honor, and Magic Seal pressure canners.

According to the USDA Complete Guide to Home Canning, consumer gauges that test two or more pounds above or below the master gauge should be replaced. A gauge that reads incorrectly can result in food being under-processed and unsafe to eat. Until a replacement gauge is obtained, adjustments can be made to reach the correct pressure. For example, if a recipe calls for 11 pounds of pressure and the gauge reads one pound high, the canner should be operated at 12 pounds of pressure.

In addition to accurate gauges, those who use canners should carefully evaluate the condition of any pressure canner they plan to use. While older canners are often available at garage sales and auctions, replacement parts for some discontinued models may be difficult—or impossible—to find.

When purchasing or inspecting a used pressure canner, consider the following:

- Is the gauge attached and in good condition?
- Is the petcock safety valve complete and functioning?
- Are the threads on the opening undamaged?
- Does the canner require a gasket, and is it in good shape?
- Is the canner perfectly round, with no bulges or distortion?
- Is the bottom flat and level? Canners with recessed or rounded bottoms should not be used.
- On wing-screw models, are all screws and matching lid slots in good condition?

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Many replacement parts, such as gaskets, handles, and knobs, can still be purchased through manufacturers and hardware stores. Although replacement parts may not look exactly like the originals, they often serve the same purpose and can safely extend the life of the canner.

Safe equipment is only one part of successful home food preservation. Using a current, research-tested recipe is equally important. While many families treasure canning recipes passed down through generations, some older recipes may not meet today's food safety recommendations. Changes in research have led to updated guidelines for acidity levels, processing methods, and processing times.

For the safest results, always use research-based recipes from trusted sources, including:

USDA Complete Guide to Home Canning

So Easy to Preserve from the University of Georgia Extension

Kansas State University Food Preservation resources

Other university Extension publications and research-based sources

By using a well-maintained pressure canner, having an accurate gauge, and following up-to-date, tested recipes, home canners can confidently preserve food that is safe, nutritious, and enjoyable for their families throughout the year.

For more information about food safety and nutrition programs, contact Sandy Haggard, Nutrition, Food Safety, and Health Agent, Southwind District, at SJHaggard@ksu.edu or 620-365-2242.

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