

Preparing For Canning Season

Now is the time to start preparing for the canning season. Before harvesting or purchasing garden produce, it's important to consider all the tools and resources needed to create safe, high-quality home-canned food. Having equipment, supplies, and recipes ready when fresh produce is available allows for a smooth transition to a busy time of year.

The three scientifically tested and approved canning methods for home food preservation are pressure canning, boiling water canning, and atmospheric steam canning. The type of food you plan to use will determine the type of canning. For low-acid foods like vegetables and meats, a pressure canner is essential. A boiling water canner or steam canner is used for high-acid foods such as fruits, tomato products, and pickled foods.

Check your cooktop requirements and warranty if you want to can. A full canner can be heavier than the stove top can bear, so you might end up with a broken range. In addition, some glass-top stoves cycle the heat on and off, so they can't maintain a steady boil.

On the pressure canner body and lid, check for signs of wear and corrosion. The gaskets, gauge, vent pipe, and safety valve should be inspected for pressure canners. If the canner has a rubber gasket, check it for drying, cracking, or tearing.

A dial gauge or a weighted gauge will be on a pressure canner. Dial gauges must be tested yearly for accuracy or if you drop or damage the gauge. Most Wyoming Extension offices offer free canner testing by appointment.

Review your pressure canner's manual for canning procedures. For more information on food preservation, visit the University of Wyoming Nutrition and Food Safety website.

If you have an enamel boiling water canner, check it for dings and chips that may become problems. Inspect the rack to ensure the handles are secure and it can hold the weight of filled jars.

Boiling water canners are made of aluminum or porcelain-covered steel. They have fitted lids and removable perforated racks. The canner must be deep enough so that at least 1 inch of briskly boiling water will be over the tops of jars during processing. A flat bottom must be used on an electric range. Both flat or ridged bottoms can be used on a gas burner.

Other essentials that should be inventoried include canning jars, lids, and ring bands. Mason-type jars designed for home canning should be used. They are designed to withstand the heat treatment during processing. Inspect the jars for nicks, cracks, or chips, especially around the top sealing edge. Take inventory of your empty jars to know how many you have on hand.

Two-piece lids are used to seal the jars in home canning. There is an upsurge of generic canning lids on the market. Unfortunately, some are not good quality and will not seal or buckle when processed.

The ring band may be re-used. Check over all your rings and discard the distorted, dented, or rusty ones.

Gather your canning utensils and store the clean tools in your canners so they are easy to find.

Check expiration dates and freshness on your preserving ingredients – pectin, pickling spices, citric acid, etc. Discard outdated items or spices that have lost their aroma and replace them with fresh ones.

A final "must" is reliable, up-to-date canning instructions. Know the most current boiling water or pressure canning methods, including altitude adjustments. Recipes should only come from research-based sources like the USDA, the National Center for Home Food Preservation, and Extension sources.

Canning is a great way to preserve food. Now is the time to review your home canning equipment and inventory your canning supplies.