Summer is in full swing and so is the harvest from our gardens. If you grow a few vegetables or if you just pick up those in season from the grocery store or farmers market, wouldn’t you like to have that fresh taste later in the year? Food preservation is a great way to keep food, including the nutrients, until your family needs it.

Unless you do something, food quickly begins to spoil soon after it is harvested or killed. The Cooperative Extension Service specializes in classes and materials to help you preserve food safely and at the highest quality.

Let’s take a quick look at the methods and how we can preserve our foods.

Canning preserves food by sealing it in airtight glass jars or cans. The heating process kills any bacteria, molds or enzymes present in the food, and the airtight seal keeps anything new from entering the jar. Canned foods are shelf stable and at best quality for one year. The foods are ready to use, if canned properly, right from the jar. The costs for canning include the equipment and electricity or propane to run the stove. It is the least expensive method to preserve foods.

Low acid foods (meats, fish, vegetables) must be canned in a pressure canner. High acid foods (fruits, jellies/jams, pickles) are canned in a hot water bath. Make sure you know which is appropriate for your product.

Freezing preserves foods by slowing down the enzyme activity, growth of microorganisms and oxidation that causes food to spoil. Freezing is the simplest and quickest method to preserve foods. It keeps fresh flavor, color and nutrients of the food. Frozen food tastes more like fresh than canned or dried foods. There is a significant cost to keeping food frozen. The electricity to keep our freezers running should be included in figuring the costs.

Drying preserves food by removing 80 to 95 percent of the moisture in a product. It reduces the water activity in a food to the point that microorganisms that cause spoilage will not grow. It slows down the action of enzymes but does not kill them. Dried food is lightweight and takes little room to store. Drying is simple to do, safe and easy to learn.
Some foods (jerky, dried fruit) are eaten just as they are; others must have water added back to them before they can be eaten.

The basic idea of food preservation is to save foods from times of plenty (harvest season) until the time that the food is not readily available. To determine if food preservation actually saves you money, you have to consider the cost of the food itself. If you are growing it or harvesting (fishing/hunting) it yourself, the cost may be low. Although, I often remind my husband that gasoline for the airboat should be considered in the cost of that harvested moose. But many of us are motivated by other considerations. I often remind people that the best way to know what is in that product is to do it yourself. The quality of the product you can produce out of your kitchen can easily surpass what is available in the store.

How do we learn the best methods for food preservation? Cooperative Extension has a multitude of ways to help you on your quest. We offer hands-on classes, written publications (downloadable on our website or available in our offices), a website called “Preserving Alaska’s Bounty” with lessons on all kinds of food preservation methods, YouTube lessons, and DVDs with step-by-step instructions that answer questions for folks as they go through the process of food preservation. We have an “ask an expert” section on our website as well as being available on the phone (474-2426) for those right now questions.

As you explore the idea of preserving your garden produce, the fish that you got at Chitina or the foods that are in season, be sure to take advantage of Cooperative Extension’s information. Give us a call and we’ll be glad to send materials to you, point you to the online lessons or publications, and even answer questions immediately.

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