Freezing your harvest

Source: Annhall Norris, UK extension specialist

With much of the year’s fresh produce ready to harvest, it is time to start thinking about what to do with the excess fruits and vegetables from your garden. While you may immediately think of canning these foods, freezing is also a good way to preserve most fresh foods.

Freezing keeps the natural color, flavor and nutritional value of most produce. To freeze foods, you must store them at temperatures at or below zero degrees F to prevent the growth of microorganisms that cause food to spoil and food-borne illness. Ideally, you should freeze produce when it is at its peak of freshness and quality. It is also very important to always wash fruits and vegetables before freezing.

You can freeze many fruits and vegetables. In fact, some of the easiest vegetables to freeze like corn, peas and green beans, are some of the most difficult to properly can.

Some produce cannot be frozen as the freezing process can make them mushy, waterlogged, tough or soggy. These include cabbage, lettuce, cucumbers, radishes and celery. Vegetables with high starch content like potatoes and mature lima beans, do not freeze well either. Shell eggs and milk-based foods also do not freeze well. Spices and herbs should not be frozen as it can cause them to develop an off flavor.

You will need to blanch most vegetables before packaging, as this process slows the enzymes that cause vegetables to continue to mature. If the vegetables are not blanched before they are frozen, the enzymes will cause the produce to lose color and flavor. After blanching, quickly cool the vegetables with cold water or ice water to stop the cooking process.

While sweetening is not necessary to freeze fruit, most will have better flavor and texture if they are packed in sugar or syrup. Depending on your intended use for the fruit, you can pack it in syrup, dry sugar or unsweetened. Fruits packed in syrup are best for desserts while those packed in dry sugar or unsweetened are best used for cooking as they contain less liquid.

Package produce in containers appropriate for freezer storage. Some stores will have containers that say this on their labels, but in general, freezer-safe containers are moisture-vapor resistant, leak-proof, durable, resistant to oil and easy to seal and label. Be mindful of headspace when packaging foods. Loosely packaged vegetables like corn on the cob, asparagus, broccoli, Brussel sprouts, cauliflower and hot peppers need no head space. All other vegetables need one-half inch head space. Depending on the type of container you use and whether you use a liquid in your fruits, you will need to leave between one-half inch to 1 inch of headspace in the container.

After packaging, seal, label and freeze immediately.

When you decide to thaw frozen produce, you should handle it like any other perishable product. Thoroughly cook the produce to kill any microorganisms or parasites that may have been present in the food.

More information on freezing foods is available in University of Kentucky extension publications “Home freezing basics,” “Freezing fresh fruits” and “Freezing vegetables.” They are available online or through your local extension office. Contact the (COUNTY NAME) office of the UK Cooperative Extension Service.

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