

Cooperative Extension News

Columns from the staff of
North Carolina Cooperative Extension
Robeson County Center

FREEZING IN JUNE

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June is my favorite month of the year. A host of flowers are blooming, the grass is a glorious green, and most days are sunny and warm. There are many things to be thankful for this month. I am especially thankful for the fruits and vegetables fresh from the garden. You can also find fresh produce at your local farmers' market or produce stand. Recently, I picked my first yellow squash, zucchini, and cucumbers...yum-yum. My daughter begged for fried squash...so yes, I relented this one time. It's one of those guilty pleasures I don't feel so guilty about because 90 percent of our meals are really healthy.

This month is a great time to stock up on fresh fruits and vegetables and preserve them for consumption throughout the rest of the year. Produce currently available includes strawberries, blueberries, sweet peas, onions, broccoli, green beans, potatoes, cucumbers, zucchini, summer squash, and fresh herbs. I overheard one farmer say corn will be available real soon.

Freezing, pickling, making jams and jellies, canning or dehydrating are all ways to preserve these fruits and vegetables. Freezing is a fairly quick and easy process that doesn't heat up the kitchen. Storage costs are more than other methods of preservation due to the electricity used. My mother, in her prime kept two chest freezers filled, not to mention all the food she canned, pickled, and jellied each year.

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There are several tips to follow when freezing fruits and vegetables. Fruits and vegetables both have enzymes. In fruits this can cause browning because of the loss of vitamin C (ascorbic acid). Enzymes in vegetables must be deactivated through a process of blanching and cooling before freezing. Blanching is simply immersing the food for a prescribed number of minutes into boiling water. Contrary to what you may have heard or read, blanching is essential for top quality vegetables. Vegetable blanching times vary depending on size and density. Fruits do not usually require blanching and browning can be controlled by adding ascorbic acid. Ascorbic acid is available in its pure form or in a commercial mixture known as "Fruit Fresh". You may also use lemon juice or citric acid, but ascorbic acid is most effective to control browning of fruits. I have even crushed vitamin C tablets when I could not find the pure stuff.

Here are a few other freezing tips. Quality does not improve with freezing; so use fruits and vegetables at their peak of ripeness. Keep the freezer at 0 degrees Fahrenheit or less and use the frozen items within one year. When freezing produce, a good rule of thumb is no more than 2 - 3 pounds of food per cubic foot of freezer space within 24 hours. Follow tested recipes and methods to ensure all the time and money you put into your products result in delicious and safe food. Check out cooperative extension websites for reliable information. The National Center for Food Preservation is a great website and can be found at <http://nchfp.uga.edu>. North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center can provide publications on most of the different types of food preservation.

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