preserving food

what is it?

To many of us preserving food means extending 'shelf-life' by opening the fridge, freezer or kitchen cupboard and bunging in processed supermarket purchases up to the recommended time. But is this the best way to obtain and store food? We now take this processing for granted, because we've got used to it. We've lost track of the original reasons, like extending availability of local fresh produce, minimising waste and keeping costs down. Modern processing is made necessary by the distance food is transported and our desire for the same choices all year round. But even in the most basic weekly basket you'll find many methods of preservation, some of which, like smoking or drying, have been around for thousands of years. Here are some methods of preserving food – modern and traditional:

High-tech / high-energy

- Refrigeration
- Freezing
- Canning
- Bottling
- Freeze-drying
- Pasteurization
- Sterilization
- Distillation
- Drying, oven

Low-tech / low-energy

- Fermentation
- Pickling / vinegar
- Dehydration
- Juices / cordials
- With sugar / honey
- Smoking
- Salting
- In alcohol
- In oil
- Drying, solar oven

No-tech / no-energy

- Dry storage, root-cellaring
- Hanging
- Clamping
- Drying – natural

Arguably, home preservation of food reached its peak in the 19th century. Methods were developed to maximise the benefits of produce from the kitchen gardens of farms and manor houses, as a way of storing good quality produce, or to deal with surpluses or poorer quality produce. Traditions have been kept going within households, by organisations such as the Women's Institute and numerous cookbooks.

Sage and thyme drying in the kitchen – recycled jars are used for storage.

what are the benefits?

Traditional preservation techniques add value and nutritional diversity to food, and offer alternatives to bland supermarket produce. Preserving is fun, rewarding and educational – bringing us closer to our food and helping understand the consequences of modern food consumerism, particularly transport, energy and waste.

Reducing waste

Preserved food can be used as required, with no wastage. Apart from land use and environmental issues, wasting food is pretty scandalous in a world where many people don't have enough to eat. The following information on food wastage is from WRAP's *Love Food Hate Waste* campaign:

- In the UK we throw away one third of the food we buy. That's like one in three bags of food shopping going straight in the bin.
- We throw away 6.7 million tonnes of food each year in the UK - most of this could have been eaten (it's not just peelings and bones – it's good food). That's equivalent to filling Wembley Stadium with food waste 8 times over!
- Producing, storing and transporting food uses a lot of energy. If we stopped wasting all this food, it would save the equivalent of at least 18 million tonnes of carbon dioxide. That's like taking 1 in 5 cars off UK roads.
- Most of this food reaches landfill sites where it emits methane, a powerful greenhouse gas.
- High economic cost: at least £10 billion worth of food that could have been eaten is thrown out every year – that's c. £400 per UK household.
- We throw food out for two main reasons: 1) we cook or prepare too much, costing us around £4 billion per year; 2) and we let food go off, either completely untouched, or opened/started but not finished, costing £6 billion per year.

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Reducing energy use

There are two main ways that home food preservation can save energy (and its associated emissions):

- Many food preservation techniques use very little or no energy, when the alternative is fridges/freezers, that do.
- We can preserve the main crop in the autumn, so that we can have unseasonal food in winter and spring, instead of flying it around the world from where it is in season.

It may feel as if it will restrict choice, but in fact it offers different choices – plus there's a great feeling of satisfaction and pleasure in serving up a home-produced meal, or giving a jar of preserve as a present.

Basic preserving equipment; a sugar thermometer helps achieve consistent setting point for jams.

what can I do?

Have a look at the list of methods above. Could you do any of them yourself? We can all do some, and many of them take little effort and save time, money and energy. It can be as simple as setting aside a shelf or hanging space in the shed, garage or cellar for storing in-season fruit or vegetables such as apples or marrows.

Ideally, you could grow your own, but if not, then buy local in-season produce to store fresh or preserve. Visit a pick-your-own farm or harvest wild food or benefit from that abandoned fruit tree in your neighbourhood. Can't bear to see the waste at your local greengrocer? Try asking for it – often they will give it away, saving you money.

Don't forget that many preservation methods evolved out of the Victorian practices of storing good quality produce (e.g. fruit for jam), or dealing with surpluses (e.g. cider or juice from apples), or poorer quality produce (green tomato chutney).

Undamaged apples will store for months, individually wrapped, in boxes in a cool shed.

Traditional methods save energy, so use them whenever possible, and if you're going to freeze, (or your fridge needs replacing) remember to use an energy-efficient appliance, preferably A++.

If you're into jam/chutney making or bottling, get the right basic equipment, such as a good maslin pan, straining muslin and sugar thermometer, and as well as re-using jam jars etc, keep a look out for second-hand preserving jars. Don't forget the importance of hygiene, both to the shelf-life of your product and to those who eat it. Don't know where to start? Follow the links on our website, or visit our online bookshop, where you'll find books on everything from clamping root vegetables to building your own solar food dryer. Better still, why not attend a preserving food course, which will give you a good mix of theory and practice.

Not in a position to do any of this? At least look at your surplus or waste food. If you can't avoid creating it, or can't store it, keep it out of landfill by composting it or feeding it to chickens, or pressure your local council to provide food waste disposal.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/preserving-food for more info, courses, links & books, including:
- Carolyn Shearlock, *Storing Food Without Refrigeration*
- Holly Davis, *Ferment*
- Helen Culpepper, *Grow, Cook, Preserve*
- stason.org/TULARC/food/preserving/ – huge preserving resource
- preservefood.com – US site with lots of info
- nchfp.uga.edu - ditto