

Dehydrating Herbs and Vegetables

Why Dehydrate?

- Easy way to handle surplus vegetables
- Convenient and compact storage without energy expenditures
- Ideal for camping, canoeing, or emergencies

Some essential concepts:

- Drying thoroughly and quickly will give the best results and preserve the maximum nutritional value and flavor.
- The intention is drying, not cooking so a temperature of 140 degrees F (60 degrees C) is about right. High temperatures or over-drying result in loss of nutrition and flavor.
- Small pieces dry faster and are more convenient to cook with later. Large pieces can dry on the outside and remain moist in the middle. Don't crowd racks.
- Clean equipment and storage containers preserve food quality.
- High quality vegetables produce the best dried foods – young, clean, fresh.
- Food needs to be protected from insects and rain during drying. Screens or fabric covers that don't touch the food are best.
- Dehydrated food will keep for a very long time provided it is kept thoroughly dry and protected from light and insects. Label with dates and use oldest first.
- Dry foods that are of similar size and moisture so that the timing will be the same for the whole batch.

Some likely targets for drying:

Herbs: parsley, basil, dill, chives

Leafy greens: spinach, chard, celery

Summer favorites: summer squash, green beans, tomatoes, peppers, sweet corn

Of course, dry beans, winter squash, onions and garlic can also be prepared for storage without completely drying.

Some tools:

- Small amounts of herbs can easily be tied in bunches for hanging, or bundled into paper bags or bandanas. Keep bundles airy for quick drying.
- Mesh bags work well for small items. Try those that oranges are packaged in or use nylon netting.
- Peppers can be strung on strings with a large needle (just pierce the body of the small peppers straight through and perhaps prick the skin in a number of places). Be careful with juice from hot peppers.
- Simple racks can be made with porous bottoms and covers of paper towels or cloth. Use these outdoors or on the dashboard of a car.
- Plans for solar dehydrators are available on the web (some addresses at the end of this handout). In summer in WI, high humidity may not allow solar dehydration as the only method, but you might be able to do the first step in drying in a solar dehydrator and finish up another way. Close observation will be needed to efficiently dry using a solar system.
- Commercial dryers use mild heat and fans to quickly dry vegetables. Prices vary from reasonable to expensive. Some plans for homemade dryers on the WWW. Some ovens can be set low enough to dry foods but use energy and heat up the house. Microwave ovens can be used with close supervision (fire danger!) for small amounts of leafy herbs.
- Many experts recommend blanching of some vegetables. My personal experience is that cutting in small pieces and drying rapidly can avoid the need to blanch before drying.

Nutritional content is not completely preserved with drying but careful treatment and storage can keep much of the food value. Dry vegetables or herbs quickly without direct sun and store in cool, dry and dark containers to preserve the maximum vitamins.

Some tips:

- Collect vegetables and herbs early in the day but after the dew is gone.
- Destem leafy herbs and cut other vegetables into small uniform pieces so that drying time is short and all pieces dry at same time.
- Drying and storage in small quantities keeps losses to minimum if mold or other problems occur.
- Drying vegetables need protection from insects and dust. Outside racks need to be brought under cover to protect from dew.
- Drying concentrates the sugars of vegetables; they will reabsorb moisture from the air unless storage containers are sealed tightly.
- For most vegetables and herbs, the end product should be brittle before storage. Check after a day or two to make sure that drying is complete. Uncover containers in the refrigerator overnight to recrisp and then tightly seal.

Potential uses for dried vegetables and herbs:

- Soups and stews – the easiest way to rehydrate and make use of many vegetables. Try slow cooker meals.
- Grind leafy vegetables and herbs to fine powder and add to breads, biscuits, dumplings, polenta, spaghetti sauce etc.
- Add dried vegetables to cream cheese for spread, sour cream for a dip or cottage cheese for filling ravioli.
- Casseroles and pasta sauce can be supplemented with rehydrated vegetables.
- Eat as a snack... Try slices of tomato, pepper or tomatillo.

Some references on line:

General references on dehydrating:

<http://www.uga.edu/nchfp/how/dry.html>

<http://www.canningpantry.com/dehydration-of-food.html>

http://www.extension.uiuc.edu/~vista/html_pubs/DRYING/dryfood.html

<http://solarcooking.org/dryingreview.htm>

Directions for solar dehydrator:

<http://www.jrwhipple.com/sr/soldehydrate.html>

<http://www.hedon.info/goto.php/view/418/forum.htm>