

Preserving Food at Home is a Tradition with Modern Appeal

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Home Food Preservation: Is It a Thing of the Past?

For the last few weeks, I have had the privilege of working with two Interns, Lizzie Severson and Tyler Livingston, Dietetic Interns from the Florida Department of Education. I asked them to research and draft this article for publication to offer them the opportunity to learn what is expected to do so. I think you will enjoy their summary of a visit to a local Tallahassee market.

When most of us go shopping at the grocery store and reach for a jar of pickles or jam, we usually don't acknowledge the fact that making these types of preserved foods used to be common home practice -- even considered a way of life. Over the years, food preservation in home kitchens has slowly become a rarity, but many people in the Tallahassee area are keeping this practice alive.

It is fun to hear stories about the preservation methods used by earlier generations. Fortunately, today we have the benefit of improved methods and equipment that are the result of scientific research addressing food safety.

We recently spoke with Linda Reagan, owner and operator of Tomato Land on Thomasville Road in Tallahassee, who shared the trends and history of food preserving as she has seen over the past several years. She explained the ways that her grandparents used to preserve food before the days of freezers and refrigerated trucks.

Reagan, a native of southern Georgia, tells her grandmother's stories about traveling to the coast on a horse and buggy (several decades ago) to pick up mullet for preserving. "They would take a big wooden barrel and they would put a layer of fish, layer of salt, layer of fish, layer of salt ... and it would take them 3 days to get back up to Cairo, [Georgia]."

Smoke houses used to be another common way to preserve meat by curing and smoking hogs. Reagan continued, "... everybody had a smokehouse, so when they killed the hogs they would hang them up in the smokehouse and put oak wood down at the bottom. After curing the meat with salt, they would smoke it until it was basically cooked through. When they wanted bacon or ham they would go out and cut a big chunk of it off." Some smokehouses are still used today to make delicious smoked pork, while many others have been converted into storage units.

Salting fish and smoking ham became old news as freezing and refrigeration became more popular. When freezers were brought into homes in the late 1950's, early 60's, people began canning less and freezing more. As technology has progressed -- providing new, more-efficient ways of storing and preserving food -- the home practice of food preservation has become less common due to the convenience and low cost of abundant processed foods.

So why do some people continue to preserve their own foods today? There are many benefits and they include: being able to eat local produce year round; having a fun activity that the family can do together; being able to control what goes into your food and keep out added synthetic preservatives; and you can proudly serve your own homegrown produce months after it has been harvested.

With the focus on food shifting back to eating local, food preservation is making a comeback. If you are interested in learning how to preserve food, there are a variety of UF/IFAS research based resources available and classes being taught in your area. Be in touch with your local County Extension Office to inquire about information as well as classes.

If you have a question, write to Shelley Swenson, Extension Agent Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Florida Extension--Wakulla County, 84 Cedar Avenue, Crawfordville, FL 32327-2063; or call the Extension Office 926-3931, between 8 a.m. to noon or 1 to 5 p.m. weekdays.

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