

Merrilee Olson of Preserve Sonoma

Excerpts from an interview with Marin Master Gardener, Jen Long, and Merrilee on 8/28/13

Who should preserve their own food, and why?

Anybody. If they have a garden, and they produce very much, and they love what they produce, then considering preserving their food is a great idea. Food preservation isn't only putting things in jars it's also freezing it properly, it can also be dehydrating, It can be a lot of things.

Essentially, people take great pride in having something that they made themselves. I think that's a real connection, for most people.

What are a few tips for beginning preservers?

First, don't be afraid. Use a tested recipe if you've never done it before, and use a tested method. That is all very clearly explained in the *Ball Complete Book of Home Preserving*. The reason I recommend the Ball book is they worked with the USDA on that book, so everything in there is rock solid.

Just try it. There's nothing to be lost. If a jam doesn't set, and it's super soft, you can turn it into a glaze, or use it in bits and pieces and turn it into a fabulous salad dressing.

What is your favorite part of preserving?

When I hold up a jar of something that is just really delicious, and I know exactly where it came from. It's seeing that beautiful fruit in the jar, at the end.

There are a million things you can put in a jar - all kinds of flavor combinations. We just did some fabulous plum and amaretto jam.... it's just incredible, it gives me goosebumps!

I love the camaraderie that comes from being in the kitchen with people who are interested in the same thing.

What is the biggest edible gardening mistake you have made?

In my first or second year of gardening I bought a Rainier cherry tree on an impulse without

doing the research to know that it needs a crosspollinizer

in order to fruit. The tree is doing

fine but until I get around to grafting a compatible variety onto it, I won't be getting any cherries. Lesson learned: Do the research, then buy!

How did you learn about gardening?

I learned a lot by osmosis from having a mother and aunt who gardened a lot. But taking

horticulture classes and reading a lot of gardening magazines and talking to a lot of gardeners brought me to a much greater level of understanding. The bottomline, however, is that there is always more to learn.

What are your favorite edible gardening resources?

Other gardeners are the very best resource. It's amazing how much you can learn from just

chatting with someone with dirt under their fingernails. But I also turn to the California Rare

Fruit Growers website frequently for information on edibles and to Pinterest for gardening

inspiration in general.

What is the most important thing to know when growing food?

Keep it clean. There's absolutely no point in growing your own food if you're going to load it

up with chemicals.

