

Tastier and Cheaper by Preserving

By Gloria Fitzpatrick, UCCE Master Food Preserver of El Dorado County

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Have you been to the grocery store lately and seen the drastic price increases and smaller packages? Food is now a higher priced necessity than ever before. Now is the time to take charge of your grocery bills. Recognizing that your freezer is one of the best assets you have in the kitchen will help you to get the most from it.

The UC Master Food Preservers of El Dorado County can help you learn the basics of freezing food, drying food, and canning food (with both boiling water canners and pressure canners). Learning safe and effective preservation methods can help you stretch your food dollar and minimize food waste.

Spring is prime time to preserve fruits and vegetables. Using them in various forms and storing them in the freezer are great money and time savers. Stocking up on fruits and vegetables when on sale can further stretch your hard-earned dollar!

Raspberries, blueberries, blackberries, and strawberries are full of antioxidants and fiber. Buy them on sale and use them up quickly for the best flavor. Freeze any extra for use throughout the year. To freeze, rinse quickly in a colander and drain on a dish or paper towels. Once dried, spread them out on a cookie sheet and freeze until solid. Place them in vacuum-sealed or plastic bags and stash in the freezer. Another option is to use rigid-sided plastic containers that are freezer safe. These containers help protect the shape of the berries in addition to protecting against freezer burn. Strawberries can be sliced after rinsing and spread out, frozen, and packaged. (These are perfect when making strawberry pretzel salad, which is a staple during summer BBQs.) All berries make great additions to smoothies, cobblers, pancakes, and my favorite, oatmeal. Stone fruit can also be frozen with some preparation. This article from the California Master Food Preserver website explains the steps necessary to best preserve your bounty: <https://ucanr.edu/sites/camasterfoodpreservers/files/340873.pdf>.

An additional way to use your fresh fruit is to make it into breads and muffins. Berries of any kind make wonderful treats. Find the recipe you like and prepare as usual. Let cool completely, then wrap them tightly in plastic wrap and place in large plastic freezer bags. Wrap tightly, making sure to cover all of the sides and ends and removing as much air as possible. I frequently use the same parchment paper that I baked the loaves in as an additional layer of protection. It helps keep the bread moist and protect it from freezer burn. I've used this recipe in the past, and it has frozen very well. <https://www.glorioustreats.com/lemon-blueberry-bread/>

Stone fruits are the stars of the show for cobblers. Bake them in a disposable foil pan and cool completely. Place uncovered in the freezer until frozen solid and then cover them tightly with 2 layers of heavy-duty aluminum foil. The cobblers can be frozen for up to 4 months. Thaw at room temperature for one hour and then place in a 375-degree oven for about 30 minutes, and enjoy!

Some vegetables can also be frozen with minimal preparation. Edible snap pea pods and snow peas can be quickly blanched, cooled, and frozen. Blanching preserves the color and helps keep the texture “crispness”. Pull them out of the freezer for a quick stir fry or inclusion in soups.

Read this article to learn the exact steps:

<https://extension.oregonstate.edu/sites/default/files/documents/8836/sp50305preservingpeasediblepeapods.pdf>

Broccoli and green beans also benefit from blanching and freezing. Some vegetables, however, do not benefit from freezing - zucchini and other types of squashes lose their texture and become watery.

I stock up on meat in bulk when I find it on sale, stretching my food budget. When I get it home I repackage into family-sized servings. I'm fortunate to have a vacuum sealer, but freezer bags work almost as well. Make sure to COMPLETELY dry your meats (chicken, beef, pork) prior vacuum sealing. Wrap tightly individual pieces and then place in a larger bag, allowing you to reach in and grab as much as you need. Don't be afraid to pre-season your meats as well, using dry rubs. Marinades do not seem to work as well with freezing. Be sure to label and date - meats have a tendency to look alike once frozen! You can easily freeze leftover meat as well. You can freeze individual portions to use in quesadillas, sandwiches etc. or you can create a casserole and use it that way. Pre-made casseroles make dinner a breeze and often use up many leftover food items. Remember to use disposable aluminum foil pans that stack easily. Here's one that uses meat, cheese and vegetables!

<https://www.eatingonadime.com/taco-rice-casserole-it-freezes-great/>

Other things that freeze great? Cheese - yes, cheese. Pre-shredded cheese freezes beautifully without repackaging. Be sure to defrost in the refrigerator and then use as needed. If you buy in bulk blocks, shred and repackage in freezer grade plastic bags, removing as much air as possible. Herbs, chili peppers, and citrus freeze very well too. Make sure they are clean and dry, then put them into the freezer and grab out as needed. They blend into any soups, stews, or cooked dishes. Lemons and limes can be zested and then juiced.

Getting the most out of your food dollar is critical at times like these. The UC Master Food Preservers of El Dorado County are a great resource for answers to your preserving question. Freezing is just one type of preservation. Learn more about the other methods by attending our in-person or online classes. Leave a message at (530) 621-5506 or email us at edmp@ucanr.edu. For more information about our program, events and recipes, visit our website at <http://ucanr.edu/edmp>. Sign up to receive our eNewsletter at <http://ucanr.org/mfpcsenews/>. Find us on Facebook, too (UCCE Master Food Preservers of El Dorado County)!