

Nuts for the Holidays!

by Pati Kenney, UC Master Food Preserver of El Dorado County

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This is an excellent time of year to take advantage of the nut harvest! Who isn't nuts over nuts? For the past 4 years I have lead a public class on nuts. Sadly, both last year and again this year we have been unable to teach in person, so I am taking this opportunity to present some of the class highlights on paper instead.

At this time of year when we are doing more entertaining, sports events, host/hostess gifts, nuts (especially walnuts) are extra prevalent. Did you know walnuts are considered a super food? They contain the highest amount of alpha-Linolenic acid; the plant based omega-3 essential fatty acid required by the human body. In addition, walnuts rank high in antioxidants and provide a convenient source of protein and fiber.

If you have a walnut or almond tree then you are lucky to have such a wonderful food source within reach. For you I recommend downloading the following publication, which will give you the best and safest way of handling the nuts as you harvest them.

Nuts: Safe Methods for Consumers to Handle, Store and Enjoy, UC ANR Publication #8460: <http://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/Details.aspx?itemNO=8406>.

If you are lucky enough to own a tree or receive a large amount of nuts in the shells, here are some ways to help preserve them.

Hull the nuts as soon as harvested. If unable to shell them the same day, do it as soon as possible. Immediately after hulling, wash the nuts to prevent dark staining and remove any dirt before drying for storage. Note: wear gloves to avoid staining hands when hulling walnuts.

Oven Drying: Hulled walnuts and almonds are best dried in trays in a dehydrator or oven. This also sterilizes them. The outside dimensions of the tray should be at least 1" smaller than the inside of the oven to allow for air circulation. Using an oven thermometer, keep the temperature at 110°F. Leave the oven door ajar at least 4" with gas ovens; less if electric. Open the door wider or turn off and on as necessary. Check nuts often, stirring occasionally. Keep the room well ventilated. To determine when walnuts are dry, take a sample and allow cooling. Walnuts and almonds are dry when kernels and membranes are brittle and no longer soft and rubbery.

Sun Drying: Hulled walnuts and almonds can be sun dried (not over 110°F) on well-ventilated trays. Support trays well off the ground to ensure good ventilation. Use trays with raised rims-any size. The bottom can be hardware cloth, small gauge poultry netting or narrow wooden slats. Stir nuts daily to ensure rapid drying. Cover them if the weather is foggy or rainy and at night protect them from dew, or take them inside.

To Blanche Almonds: Cover nuts with cold water and bring shelled nuts to a boil. Drain and when cool enough to handle, slip the skins from the almonds by pressing them between your thumb

and fingers. Toasting almonds intensifies their flavor and adds crunch.

Storing: Walnuts, almonds, and other nuts keep better and longer if left in the shells. Most nuts need protection from oxygen in the air and from high temperatures that may cause the fats in the nuts to go rancid.

Store your nuts in a cool dry place. Unbleached nuts may be stored for about a year, but bleached ones should be used within 6 months. To retard rancidity, shelled nuts should be stored in the refrigerator or freezer. For large amounts you can pack them in coffee cans or plastic containers with tight fitting lids. Personally, I like to use freezer bags so they can be stacked to take up less room. They should keep well in the freezer for over a year. They will keep 6 to 9 months in the refrigerator. Some of you, like me, have purchased nuts in tidy, little bags from the market, only to discover they are already too rancid to use. If you have your own private stock, you can avoid this disappointment.

So now that you have done all that is necessary to properly store your nuts, let's discover some yummy ways to use them other than just dumping into a dish for snacking or in cookies, etc. Here are a couple of my most popular nut recipes. These are not difficult and don't require a lot of time or fancy equipment. Family and friends alike will love them — I guarantee it!

Maple Glazed Walnuts

Yield: about 2 cups

2 cups walnut halves
1/3 cup maple syrup
1/8 tsp salt

Preheat a dry skillet over medium-high heat. Add the walnuts, maple syrup and salt. Cook, stirring frequently, until syrup is caramelized and nuts are toasted, about 3 minutes. Let cool. Store the nuts in an airtight container in the refrigerator. *Source: California Walnut Board*

Sour Cream Walnuts

Yield: about 3 cups

1 cup brown sugar
1/2 cup white sugar
1/2 cup sour cream
1 tsp vanilla
3 cups walnut halves

Cook and stir sugars with sour cream to a soft ball stage (240°F). Remove from heat and stir in vanilla. Add walnuts, stirring gently until coated. Spread on pan to cool. Store the nuts in an airtight container in refrigerator.

Note: walnuts need to be cooled to let the candy coating adhere. Plan to make these the day before serving.

Source: California Walnut Board

Oriental Almonds

Yield: About 2 cups

1-1/2 tbsp butter

1-1/2 tbsp Worcestershire sauce

1 tsp salt

1/4 tsp cinnamon

1/8 tsp chili powder

Dash of hot pepper sauce

10 ounces blanched whole almonds (about 2 cups)

Melt butter in a 2-quart baking dish in a 300°F oven. Stir in Worcestershire sauce, salt, cinnamon, chili powder and hot pepper sauce. Add almonds. Stir until completely coated.

Bake, stirring occasionally for 15 minutes or until almost are crisp.

Source: Gifts from the Sunset Kitchen

UCCE Master Food Preservers are available to answer home food preservation questions; leave a message at (530) 621-5506 or email us at edmfp@ucanr.edu. For more information about our program and events, visit our website at <http://ucanr.edu/edmfp>. Sign up to receive our ENewsletter at <http://ucanr.org/mfpnews/>. Find us on Facebook, too (UCCE Master Food Preservers of El Dorado County)!