

## **Preserving Good Things!**

by Candace Mullen, Bell County Master Gardener

Have you ever had a neighbor knock on your door and beg you to take his surplus? -- Garden surplus, that is! I bet that we all know someone who planted more than one zucchini plant in his vegetable garden, big mistake. This prolific plant will literally produce bushels of squash! And of course tomatoes will sometimes fall into the overabundant category, too. The question becomes, "What do I do with the excess?" The answer is, preserve it! Preserving can be done in many different ways that don't entail boiling pots, scalding jars, and hot wax! You might be surprised at what can be preserved and how it can be done nowadays.

Anyone with a microwave, freezer, extra pantry space, and a yen to have out of season foods can take advantage of the new methods for preserving. You don't even have to have a surplus from the garden. With the grocery stores and farmer's markets around, you can buy what you want and begin your preserving career. It doesn't even take hours and hours anymore or even an experienced cook to do the preserving. Even a novice in the kitchen can make beautiful creations and preserves. We are talking about curing meat, making various sauces and vinegars, creating your own salsa, marinade, dried fruits, fruit leathers, drinks and juices, butters, chutneys, dips, and on and on. Once you have preserved the creations, you will have wonderful gifts that everyone will appreciate and love.

Let's take a look at using the freezer. I am sure that everyone has at one time or another put an excess of soup, meat, or even leftovers into the freezer. Guess what? That is considered preserving, too! See, you're already an old hand at this stuff. Well, the packages of fruit pectin (found in the sugar aisle) now have directions for freezer jam and jellies that don't need any cooking. Just follow the directions EXACTLY and you can make wonderful tasting preserves. The freezer jams and jellies really taste like just picked fruits and have wonderful color, are easy to make, and will stay a long time in the freezer. There are several brands of fruit pectin both powdered and liquid, some use no sugar at all in the recipe, and all are very good and easy to use. The one thing to remember is that the directions are exact and any deviation with measurements and timing will result in a disaster. This is one time no substitutions are allowed in the game unless specified.

Jams and jellies are not the only things you can preserve in the freezer. All kinds of fruits and vegetables can be frozen, including herbs. Of course, baked or unbaked prepared dishes (like pies and casseroles) also fall into this category. Have you ever tried freezing mint sprigs in ice cube trays with water and then adding the cube to iced tea in the hot summer days? Now that's really great tasting! I freeze lemon halves after I make lemonade so I can grate them and use them later. I also buy fresh peppers and onions on sale, clean and slice them, and place them in gallon freezer bags to use later. I just add them while frozen to various dishes. Just make sure you use freezer paper or bags and label/date everything so you can use them! Sometimes buying in bulk, like lunchmeats, cheese and other foods are cheaper and easier on the budget. Just preserve the excess for later usage in smaller portions. Grate the cheese all at once and then freeze it to pull out when you need it for that great omelet or spaghetti. Just consider the possibilities of your freezer!

Or, you might put that microwave to work instead of the freezer for a change. This brings us to the topic of drying to preserve edibles. Dried food has the moisture removed and can't support the growth of microorganisms. Properly dried food retains most nutrients as well as flavor and color. Use only food in fresh, prime condition and work quickly. Food to be dried should be cut into small or thin pieces so that it will dry quickly. Pieces to be dried together should be about the same size so they will take the same amount of time to dry. Most fruits need no preparation for drying beyond washing, slicing, or cutting up, but vegetables need blanching first to set the color. Steam blanching or microwave blanching are the best methods because blanching in boiling water adds more liquid to the vegetable and makes the process longer. The taste is also better and you don't need to cool the vegetables first either. Just follow the directions in your microwave instruction booklet and you will have success.

You can also try oven drying but not hotter than 140 degrees for about 12 to 14 hours or overnight. Don't overload the oven and check the trays often. You might also try sun drying or air-drying various

vegetables or fruits, like mushrooms and tomatoes! Just follow the directions in any good cookbook so the food won't spoil!

Of course, even the old fashioned art of canning and pickling has undergone some changes and improvements. Just look in the grocery store for jars of all kinds and sizes to see what's new. I would also recommend getting a good cookbook labeled especially for canning and freezing. I still use the wonderful cookbook from the food editors of Farm Journal that has wonderful, easy recipes for everything you might want to preserve. I also have 2 little books from Storey Publishing in Vermont that deal with preserving fruits and vegetables and also making mustards, ketchups and vinegars. The pictures are beautiful and the instructions are easy to follow. Or just ask a friend for their secrets or search the web!

There is really a sense of accomplishment when you look at the beautiful jars and containers of homemade oils, vinegars, jams, or vegetables you have made yourself. It is also the way to have good tasting food without preservatives and additives making the allergy sufferers worse and quite often a way to save money in the budget. And best of all, a novice can preserve just about anything these days for great gifts. So let's all take a chance and try preserving a little something this summer to enjoy later on in the year! Happy Preserving!

You can prune old dead and diseased wood from trees and shrubs. Wait until mid winter to do any major pruning. Be sure to treat all wounds on oak trees with black latex paint as soon as the cut has been made to prevent infection with the oak wilt fungus. Wind damage to oak trees should be removed and wounds treated as soon as possible.

A late summer pruning of roses can be beneficial. Remove dead canes and brushy growth. Be sure to fertilize and water after pruning and your roses will reward you with a great crop of fall blooms.

You can still plant warm season annuals such as marigolds, zinnias, and periwinkles. These plants will need some extra care until they are well established but should bloom late into fall. When planting this time of the year take extra precautions. It is best to plant in the morning or early afternoon so that plants are not stressed immediately by the worst of our sun. Water them in well with a transplant helper such as a root stimulator and mulch well around the plant. Do not let mulch touch the plants. Monitor the plants carefully for the next two weeks to ensure they do not dry out and they should do well the rest of the summer and into fall though the heat may cause slower growth at first.

Continue to pick off the old blossoms from your annuals and perennials. This will encourage them to continue to bloom. Annuals generally do not need to be fertilized in July. Continue to fertilize container grown plants. Only fertilize perennials that are actively growing. Hot weather can stress and slow perennial growth. If you fertilized in June do not do so in July.

Now is the time to sow seeds for fall transplants. You can have pansies, Johnny-jump-ups, calendulas, and other cool season plants like lettuce. Start them now and they will be ready to put in the garden in September or early October.

As summer does take its toll, remove dead plant material. Always remove dead and dying vegetation to reduce pest and disease problems. Now would be a good time to start a compost pile. You will already have a place to put all those fall leaves!

Finally remember that your turf grass needs 1-2 inches of water a week this time of the year. Apply the water slowly in early morning allowing it to soak in (not run off) and water deeply to a depth of 6 inches if you have that much soil under your turf! Continue to mow before it gets too tall as longer grass uses more water. Fortunately hot weather also slows grass growth and you will not have to mow as often to keep your turf healthy. If you feel strongly that you must fertilize your Bermuda lawn, use a Nitrogen only, slow release, fertilizer and water it in well to avoid fertilizer burn. Watch out for dry and dead patches that can be caused by hot weather pests such as chinch bugs and white grubs. For chinch bugs treat only affected areas, white grub problems require the entire yard to be treated with an appropriate pesticide.