

# Preserving fruits and vegetables without sugar



Diabetes  
New Zealand

Autumn is a perfect time to preserve seasonal produce. Preserving can give you immense satisfaction and can also save you money. New Zealand registered dietitian **Alison Pask** gives us some tips on preserving fruits and vegetables without using sugar.

Preserving fruits and vegetables is very rewarding. If you grow your own fruits and vegetables, extend their seasons by preserving them. If you don't grow your own, wait until they are in season and plentiful, as you'll then pay the lowest price for your favourites.

Recipes for preserving fruit usually contain sugar. However, you can produce a successful result without adding sugar. While sugar helps to hold the texture and retain the shape and colour of the fruit, it is primarily added for flavour.

Sugar is not needed to prevent spoilage. You can safely preserve all fruits in water by following reliable recipes.

## Bottling

Invented in 1809 by Nicholas Appert, a French confectioner, bottling is a process of preserving food by heating and sealing it in airtight containers.

The scientific principle behind bottling is simple. Food decay and spoilage are caused either by enzymes in the food itself or by bacteria and other micro-organisms.

During the bottling process, the food is heated to a high temperature to stop the action of the enzymes and kill all organisms that cause decay. The food is then sealed in airtight containers to prevent contamination and to preserve it for long periods of time.

## Freezing

You can freeze all fruits without adding sugar. Sugar is not needed for the preservation of frozen fruits, but it does help the fruit maintain quality for longer.

Berries and fruits that do not darken when



Follow reliable recipes to safely preserve fruits and vegetables without sugar

exposed to air such as cherries, plums, grapes, melon balls, pineapple chunks and rhubarb slices, are best frozen in single layers on trays, then packed into freezer bags or containers.

Light-coloured fruits such as apples, peaches and apricots freeze well in liquid.

Berries are some of the most flavourful and colourful fruits. Their season is often short, so if you do not have time to preserve them as jams, jellies, vinegars and syrups, simply freeze them for later use as they freeze well.

When freezing any food, pack it to allow for 10% expansion as fruits and vegetables are mostly water and water expands when turning to ice.

For soft herbs such as parsley, basil, tarragon and chives, chop finely and pack into ice-cube trays, top up with water and freeze. If you have lots to freeze, transfer to a plastic bag when frozen and then take out as and when you need them. You will find the herbs discolour during freezing but a certain amount of flavour remains.

You can also freeze coarse herbs such as rosemary, sage and thyme. Strip the leaves from the stalk and pack into small plastic bags, extract the air, and freeze.

## Dry storing

Fruits and vegetables store well without being preserved as long as they are kept in the right conditions. Apples and pears will keep for months if you choose unblemished fruit.

Wrap each one in dry newspaper and place in a single layer in the bottom of a wooden crate or shallow cardboard box. Store in a dry, airy place.

Vegetables like potatoes or beetroot also store well. For beetroot, cut off the leafy tops and place in a single layer in a wooden or cardboard box to dry.

Store potatoes in hessian or paper sacks; just remove any moist mud to prevent mould forming. Pumpkins last well when treated this way too. Store in a cool, airy, dark place.

You can also store onions and garlic. Plait the leafy tops and then hang them up to dry in a dry place.

### General tips for preserving without sugar

- Always use the best, top quality ingredients
- Preserve fruits and vegetables at their peak of ripeness - don't use over-ripe produce
- Use a reliable home-tested recipe
- Label jars and store in a cool dry dark place
- For best quality, use home preserved fruits and vegetables within 12 months.

### For something a bit different

- Turn a traditional strawberry jam into something special with the addition of chilli or a splash of balsamic vinegar
- Spice up pickled onions with Thai spices
- Combine different fruits to make an interesting jelly.

If you don't have a food dehydrator try oven-drying - a fantastic way of making the most of too many tomatoes, chillies, aubergines and even apples or pears, although it isn't very energy efficient.

Place sliced food in a single layer on a rack or tray in a warm oven (65°C) for 3-10 hours. The time will depend on the item you are drying. Leave the oven door ajar to allow air movement to carry the moisture away. Turn the food regularly to ensure even drying.

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### Carbohydrate portion

Sugar free jams and jellies and preserved fruits and vegetables will contain the carbohydrate that is naturally present in the fruit or vegetable.

This means you need to count the portion towards your overall carbohydrate intake of each meal.

### Using artificial sweeteners

Sweet relish and pickle recipes do not adapt as well to sugar free processes as do plain fruits. Try recipes that call for artificial sweeteners, but don't be too discouraged if some batches are disappointing.

Sugar helps in gel formation, serves as a preserving agent, and contributes to the flavour of jams and jellies. It also has a firming effect on fruit, a property useful in making preserves.

You can make satisfactory jams and jellies without added sugar but they tend to resemble gelatin fruited desserts rather than true jams or jellies. Carefully follow recipes and processing times for each recipe.

Check the labels of the artificial sweetener you have chosen as some work better than others when it comes to preserving. Don't use a sweetener which goes bitter when heated such as saccharine or aspartame. If you desire, add artificial sweetener just before serving to avoid the heat destroying the sweetness.

Commercially prepared low sugar food is costly because the quantity handled is small and production procedures are slightly different from those for conventionally preserved foods.

Preserving food at home can be a practical way to save money if you have fresh produce and the necessary equipment available. Make the most of seasonal produce by reaping the benefits of your preserving throughout the year.