Go Green – Preserve the Greens

Today’s food color trend is GREEN – as in leafy greens (spinach, kale, beet and turnip greens, endive, Swiss chard and others).

Leafy greens are excellent sources of vitamins A, C, and K and good sources of folate and calcium. Recently, we’ve learned that leafy greens are a good source of Nitric Oxide (NO). NO is a gas that forms in the body and signals arteries to relax and expand, tells immune cells to kill cancer cells, and helps brain cells to communicate. Nitric Oxide has been noted to help prevent and reverse cardiovascular disease. Source: “Say NO to Disease: Preventing and Reversing Disease by Generating Nitric Oxide with Whole Foods”, S. Polizzi, MPH, RD, CHES, Oregon State University Extension, June 2013.

Leafy greens are used in salads or sandwiches, added to hotdishes and soups, eaten raw or dried and pureed for juices or smoothies. The possibilities are almost endless!

To store, wrap fresh greens in damp paper towel and place in a perforated plastic bag and refrigerate. Most refrigerated greens keep one week if they are in good condition and the paper towel is kept moist. For longer storage, either freeze, can or dry greens. Note: Freezing maintains the best nutritional quality.

Freezing Greens: Rinse greens several times in cold water to clean well. Blanch small amount (4 cups) in 1 gallon boiling water: spinach=1½ minutes; other greens=2 minutes. Steam blanching is not recommended as the leaves mat together and do not blanch properly. Drain and put into freezer container. Barely cover with ice water, leave ½” headspace, seal and freeze.

Greens may be canned; although, freezing results in a better product. Canning Greens: Wash greens well. Blanch 1 pound of greens at a time for 3-5 minutes until well wilted. Fill jars loosely and add boiling water. Process in pressure canner: pints=70 minutes and quarts=90 minutes. http://z.umn.edu/nl3

Drying Greens: Trim and wash greens well. Water-blanch for 1½ minutes. Dry until crisp (6-10 hours).

If you puree greens into juice for smoothies or nutritional drinks, store in glass jars in the refrigerator up to 24 hours to maintain nutritional quality or freeze.
Pesto

Ah, the flavor and fragrance of basil! A delicious way to bring basil flavor to pasta, vegetables, and sandwiches beyond summer is to preserve basil as pesto.

Pesto is an uncooked sauce traditionally made with fresh basil, garlic, pine nuts, parmesan cheese and olive oil. Although now, pesto, Italian for “pounded”, is broadening its horizons to include a variety of herbs, greens, nuts, and cheeses. Ex: walnuts may be substituted for the pine nuts or pesto made with cilantro or mint.

Create pesto by crushing ingredients with a mortar and pestle, finely chopping with a food processor, or briefly mixing in a blender.

When making pesto to freeze, omit the cheese (it doesn't freeze well). When you want to use, thaw and add in grated Parmesan or Romano cheese.

Freeze pesto in freezer jars or freezer containers, leaving ½-inch headspace. Drizzle 1½ teaspoons of olive oil over pesto. Or, a convenient way to freeze pesto is to use an ice cube tray. When cubes are frozen remove from tray and store in a freezer bag. [http://bit.ly/1xv5osL](http://bit.ly/1xv5osL)

Freezing Herbs

Some herbs freeze better than others—is an important guideline to know. “Freezing Herbs” directions are often very general, encompassing all herbs. The results of a non-specific herb freezing process can result, for example, in black frozen basil and other herb color and flavor disappointments.

A better piece of advice might be “know thy herb” when it comes to freezing. You may best learn from “trial and error” along with seeking tested methods for freezing the herb of your choice. Herbs amenable to freezing include: chives, chervil, dill, fennel leaves, parsley and tarragon.

Also, the method used to freeze the herb determines product quality. As shared, basil pesto freezes well, fresh basil not so well.

**Ways to freeze herbs:**

- as pesto—herb blended with oil and other ingredients
- as ice cubes—chopped herb pressed into trays, covered with water or blended with a bit of water to make a cube
- blanch herbs—basil retains better color
- stuffed tightly into freezer bags
- whole—freeze sprigs, like rosemary or thyme in freezer bags
- herb butter—mix chopped herbs into butter
- and, the method of freezing herbs that works for you!

**Blanching herbs?**

Some herbs, like basil, benefit from a 15-20 second dip in boiling water, followed by cooling in ice water. Blanching helps to enhance and preserve their bright color. It also ensures the frozen herbs stay fresh longer, retaining their quality for about six months.

Many frozen herbs will retain flavor that will enhance your winter soups, stews, pasta dishes, vegetables, and baked goods.

**Kale Chips are Popular!**

A reader shared this kale drying method (to not burn them!): Heat oven to 425°F. Prepare kale (wash, spin, strip stem), season with oil, salt or seasoned salt. Spread on baking sheet. Put into oven and turn the oven OFF. Leave the kale in the oven for 15-20 minutes. Result: evenly crisp kale chips.
Homemade Herb Vinegars

Herb vinegars are great gifts and add interest to meats, vegetables or salads.

For herb-flavored vinegars, use fresh or dried herbs (mint, basil, dill, oregano, chives, tarragon) by themselves, in herb combinations or with fruits.

For a safe product, sterilize clean jars for 10 minutes in boiling water and use clean lids.

Heat the vinegar and pour over the flavoring ingredients leaving 1/4” head space. Leave the vinegar in a cool, dark place for 3-4 weeks to develop flavors.

Once you have the flavor you like, strain and pour into clean sterilized jars and cap tightly.

Store the vinegar in a boiling water bath. The Ball Blue Book includes processing directions for flavored vinegars.


Freezer Containers

Freezer containers should keep moisture in the product and keep air out. Look for easy-to-seal, durable, and easy-to-mark containers which are reasonably priced. Do not freeze foods in containers over one-half gallon because food freezes too slowly and there will be too many ice crystals.

Good freezer containers include plastic freezer containers, flexible freezer bags, or glass jars. Square or rectangular flat-sided containers make good use of freezer space because you can stack them easily. If jars are used, be sure to use wide-mouth jars because the narrow-mouth (regular) jars break easily at the neck.

Plastic sandwich bags, bread wrappers and cartons from cottage cheese, sour cream, milk or whipped toppings are not suitable for long-term freezer storage because food will develop freezer burn.

Vacuum Sealers

Vacuum sealers are popular for packaging food at home. They are great for refrigerated foods, dried foods and frozen foods.

Because the machine removes some of the air from the package, it helps keep foods fresher in the freezer and prevents freezer burn.

- Keep vacuum-sealed perishable foods like fresh produce, meat, fish, semi-dried foods and moist bakery items, in the refrigerator or freezer. Harmful bacteria will grow in these foods if left unrefrigerated.
- A vacuum sealer extends the shelf life of dried nuts, fruits, vegetables, and jerky.
- A vacuum sealer helps preserve the quality of raw meat, seafood, processed meats (bacon, hotdogs, sausages, etc.) that are stored in the freezer.

Good News

There has been concern about bisphenol A (BPA) in the coating on the inside of canning lids. Jarden Home Brands, which manufactures the Ball®, Kerr®, and Golden Harvest® canning 2-piece lids, removed BPA from lids effective 2013.

In early 2014, FDA released information from a recent study that shows that bisphenol A does not affect human health at low doses. If you have lids from other years, it is still safe to use them due to the tiny amount used.
Dealing with Spoiled Foods

Although we don’t like to talk about it, home preserved foods can spoil. Spoiled foods can make you very sick with flu-like symptoms. Before using home canned foods:

- Inspect jars before opening. The lid should be firm and flat or curved slightly inward with no leakage or mold around the seal or jar neck.

- As you open the jar, check if there is an in-rush or an out-rush of air. If the air rushes out or liquid spurts, it is spoiled.

- Smell the contents. An “off” odor (acid, sour, putrid, etc.) means spoilage.

- Check the texture and color. Liquids should be clear. Any texture or color change tells us there may be spoilage.

- DO NOT TASTE questionable foods. Do not even stick your finger into the jar!

Throw away spoiled canned food. If it is high acid (fruit or tomatoes), throw it in the garbage or garbage disposal. If it is a low acid food (vegetable, meat, fish, poultry), it must be thrown away more carefully because it may contain the botulism toxin.

Do not contaminate the area by spilling any of the food. Wear rubber gloves when handling the food and containers. Throw it out by one of the following ways:

- Boil at a full rolling boil for 20 minutes and throw out
- Burn
- Mix food with 1-2 tablespoons household lye or 1 cup chlorine bleach in a non-metal container. Let stand overnight. Flush it down the toilet or discard it in the garbage or garbage disposal.

Any containers or utensils that come in contact with spoiled foods should be washed and sterilized. Throw away lids, screw bands, washcloths, sponges and gloves.

Frequently Asked Questions

Can I use the Classico® pasta sauce containers that say “Atlas-Mason” jars for canning?

No. According to correspondence from Heinz, “We do not recommend re-using the Atlas-Mason jars used to package our Classico® Sauces. A coating is applied at the glass plant to reduce scratching and scuffing. If scratched, the jar becomes weaker at this point and can more easily break. This would increase the risk of the jar breaking when used for canning. Also, the lighter weight of our current jar could make it unsafe for home canning.”

You can use the jars to store dehydrated and frozen foods. Since the jars have rounded shoulders, if you freeze liquids, be sure to fill the jars below the shoulder to avoid cracking off the top of the jar as the liquids expand.

Are reusable canning lids (Tattler®) safe to use?

Reusable canning lids have been around for 40 years and today, there is renewed interest in these lids. When using the lids, carefully follow the manufacturer’s (Tattler®) instructions. This lid should not impact the safety of the product as long as the food was processed properly. Currently, there is no research that gives seal failure rates, number of reuses or performance when reused. The National Center for Home Food Preservation is now studying the performance of these lids with results expected in 2014 or 2015.

For more food safety information visit our website: extension.umn.edu/food-safety.

If you would like to stop receiving the Home Food Preservation newsletter, please email schmi374@umn.edu.