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6 Canning Best Practices from an Expert Canner

COVID has set off a canning craze. Chef Emery Gray, a canning expert, shares her six top tips for mastering the practice.

By Katie Lockhart | December 08, 2020

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With outdoor activities like gardening reaching an all-time high in 2020, it's no surprise a canning craze has followed.

"I'm confident that because of COVID and not going to the store, people took advantage of the time at home and grew their own food," says Emery Gray, the chef and farm to table manager at Billings Farm & Museum who leads various canning workshops at Billings and Woodstock Inn and Resort. "They made sure they had a supply and then canned all of it. When I went to the store to try to find canning supplies during what I thought was the earlier side of things (June), they were almost flying off the shelves."

While canning might not be difficult, it's a scientific step-by-step process. Gray shares six tips to make you a master canner.



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Keep things fresh & clean

Canning results are best if the fruits and vegetables used are ripe, meaning they're at peak flavor, freshness and nutritional value. "Any moldy fruit or food, you can cut a part off of it, but ideally, you would use it before it started to spoil," Gray says. During winter, potatoes, green beans, and beets are at their best for canning.

Find a real recipe

One of the first steps in the canning process is finding a recipe through an approved source and sticking to it. "If someone says, 'Oh, I tweaked it a little bit,' I would be concerned about that," Gray says. As with baking, canning steps must be followed to a tee. A recipe is designed for the best balance of ingredients combined with acidity for food longevity and resistance to bacteria growth. Gray finds her recipes online and through a *Better Homes and Gardens* book called *You Can Can*.

Know your method

It's important to know which method of canning to use for the food you're canning. For acidic foods like tomato sauce or apple butter, you should use the water bath method. Root vegetables like potatoes and beets have to be canned in a pressure canner. "Each method heats the internal temperature of the food while you're canning to a certain degree, which then kills the bacteria and microorganisms," Gray says. The recipe you choose will tell you which method of canning to use so you can prepare the tools you need.





Invest in the proper tools

Quality vegetables are key when canning, but so are quality tools. There are tons of different canning kits you can buy online. If you're not able to invest in a full kit, Gray recommends buying two tools. The first is a wide-mouth funnel. "That helps you easily put your food into a hot jar in a quick way," she says. "You want your jar to be nice and warm when the food goes in." The second item is a jar lifter, like tongs for the lid of the jar. "That easily helps you lift them in and out of the water so you don't have to worry about burning yourself or a jar slipping and splashing," says Gray.

Get new lids

Canning is a sustainable way to eliminate food waste, so reusing the glass jars is recommended. "I stick to the Ball jar, which is the brand name jar," Gray says. But it's essential to replace the lids to ensure the proper seal on the jar. "I always make sure that I re-buy the flat parts of the lid, with a little rubber gasket, but I reuse the rings if they're not rusted or damaged," Gray says.

Beware of air bubbles

Removing air bubbles and air pockets from the outside of the jar are crucial. "If you put the food in too fast, or it's a thicker material, you could create a little air

gap," Gray says. "All the air trapped in there can start to spoil your food from the inside." To remove air pockets, run a thin rubber spatula or butter knife around the inside wall of the jar—almost like you're trying to remove a cake from the pan.

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