Think safety first when canning food at home

K-State’s Blakeslee says preparation is key to preserving foods successfully

MANHATTAN, Kan. – Americans have been canning foods at home for more than 100 years. Yet still, says Kansas State University food safety specialist Karen Blakeslee, there’s always something new to learn.

“There are many older methods that are not safe to use,” Blakeslee said. “So, it’s important to stay up to date.”

“There are a variety of mistakes that can lead to serious food safety problems when preserving food at home by canning. A vast majority of canning or sealing failures are due to user error. Just because the jar is sealed, that doesn’t mean the food is safe.”

Some common mistakes that Blakeslee listed include:

- Following old and unsafe recipes, some of which may have been passed down through generations of families.
- Following recipes that have not been tested and approved, or adhere to current USDA guidelines. The Internet is full of untested and unapproved recipes.
- Using an incorrect jar size.
- Using improper processing methods.
- Storing food in an unsafe location, such as a place where it is too hot, cold or moist.
- Adjusting the band too tightly.
- Not adjusting processing times for altitude.

Blakeslee, coordinator of K-State’s Rapid Response Center for Food Safety, maintains a website, Preserve it Fresh, Preserve it Safe, with current guidelines for canning.
“In canning, the goal is to produce a safe product and reduce risks of botulism,” Blakeslee said. “Instances of botulism occur most often in home canned foods. Before canning any food, be sure to have all equipment ready to go.”

Some examples of preparing for home canning include examining canning jars so that they are clean and free of cracks or chips; ensuring that you have new lids — “never re-use canning lids as they may not seal,” Blakeslee said — and if using a dial gauge pressure canner, get it tested every year.

Contact your local extension office to ask about testing a dial gauge pressure canner. Blakeslee said local offices can test four brands: National, Presto, Magic Seal and Maid of Honor pressure canners.

“Be sure that canning equipment is maintained and ready to use,” Blakeslee said. “Use the correct processing method for the type of food. Water bath canning (a lower-temperature process) will safely process high acid foods, such as jelly and fruit. Pressure canning (temperatures of 240 degrees Fahrenheit or higher) must be used for plain vegetables and all meats.”

“Along with using the correct processing method, be sure to adjust processing for your elevation,” she added. More information can be found in the publication, What’s Your Elevation.

According to Newell Brands, Inc., a parent company of Ball brands, 35.1% of Americans who can foods do so one to two times per year, while 27.3% can seven or more times per year. “Most canning occurs between June and October, and picks up again during the holiday season,” Blakeslee said.

“Food preservation is a great family activity and can be very rewarding,” she added. It is a great way to preserve home grown food or food from a farmers market and then share the bounty with family and friends. Be smart about home canning for success.”

More food safety tips are available online from the K-State Rapid Response Center.

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
Preserve it Fresh, Preserve it Safe, www.rrc.k-state.edu/preservation/index.html

K-State Research and Extension local offices, www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/stateandareamaps.html


K-State Rapid Response Center, www.rrc.k-state.edu

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