

Ask an Expert: Eight Tips for Freezing Produce

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Fruits and

vegetables are abundant this time of year, and now is a great time to preserve the harvest. One preservation method that is sometimes overlooked is freezing.

Freezing is safe, fast and gives the freshest taste with the highest nutrition rate of any preservation method. Freezing doesn't kill bacteria, so make sure you wash and package your produce well. Freezing slows or prevents bacterial growth because of the low temperatures. Consider these tips to get the best results.

- * Freezers should be kept at 0 degrees Fahrenheit.
- * Package food in rigid, freezer-safe containers or freezer bags. Make sure to label them.
- * Vegetables are best blanched and cooled before being frozen, since it stops the ripening action; however, there are a few exceptions. Sweet or hot peppers can be washed and placed in freezer bags to be used later in salsas or meals. Onions may also be frozen without blanching, but should be double bagged to prevent odor transfers to other foods.
- * Fruits typically do not need pretreatment, but for convenience wash and drain them, then freeze individual pieces on a tray. It will take about an hour for them to freeze enough to take the pieces off the tray and place them in freezer bags. When you're ready to use them, simply remove the amount you need rather than thawing the entire bag.
- * For small berries, the less handling the better. Wash, drain and put them in one layer in a freezer bag. Place the freezer bags flat on the tray in the freezer so they

freeze as individual pieces. That way, you won't have to repackage them and risk breaking them into pieces.

* For best quality, do not let frozen fruit completely thaw before eating, as the freezing process damages the cell structure, making the fruit mushy. Put fruit out to eat when you can still see ice crystals.

* Tomatoes can be washed and frozen with peelings on and can be used later in salsa or other recipes. To peel the skins prior to using, pour boiling water over them, and the peelings will slip off. Let the tomatoes thaw a little before trying to chop them for salsa.

* Measure any fruit to be used in a recipe while it is still slightly frozen, and include any liquid from thawing in the measurement.

For more information, visit the National Center for Home Food Preservation website at <http://nchfp.uga.edu/> and click on the link for freezing.

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