

Get Ready for Canning Season

Start with your pressure canner.

Three manufacturers, Presto, Mirro, and All-American, make pressure canners in the USA. If your canner is made by another manufacturer, have it checked by your County Extension agent and ask for the agent's recommendation as to whether it is safe to use. A pressure canner must be able to hold at least four, upright, closed quart jars; most hold seven or more quarts. In preparation for the season, clean your canner's vent and safety valve (overpressure plug). To clean the vent, draw a clean string or narrow strip of cloth through the opening. Check to make sure the safety valve is free of debris and operates freely. Clean the valve by following the manufacturer's instructions.

Next, check the gasket. It is the rubber-like ring that helps seal the edges of the canner and lid to prevent steam from escaping. The gasket is removable for cleaning or replacement by following the manufacturer's directions. If needed, a new gasket can be ordered from the canner manufacturer or found at hardware stores. (All American canners do not have gaskets; they have a metal to metal seal.)

If your canner has a dial gauge, mark your calendar now for a time to have your gauge tested. Contact your County Extension Agent for information on checking the accuracy of the gauge. Gauge testing should be done well ahead of canning season. If the gauge tests off more than 1 pound of pressure at 5, 10, or 15 pounds, it should be replaced.

Follow the manufacturer's directions for care of the sealing edges of your canner. If your canner has a dial gauge, be careful not to immerse the gauge when cleaning. The darkened surface on the inside of an aluminum canner can be cleaned by filling it above the darkened line with a mixture of 1 tablespoon cream of tartar to each quart of water. Place the canner on the stove, heat water to a boil, cover it and boil it until the dark deposits disappear. Stubborn deposits may require the addition of more cream of tartar. Empty the canner and wash it with hot soapy water, rinse and dry. Hint: Hard water deposits may be reduced by adding 1 tablespoon of white vinegar to the water in the canner while processing jars.

Store your pressure canner with crumpled clean paper towels in the bottom and around the rack to help absorb moisture and odors. Place the lid upside down on the canner. Never put the lid on the canner and seal it; doing this stresses the gasket and holds in moisture and off-odors.

Second, check your boiling water canner.

Graniteware boiling water canners are inexpensive, ridged on the bottom and can be used on electric and gas ranges. They are not suitable for use on smooth top ranges. Aluminum is a good choice for a boiling water canner; it transfers heat

efficiently and is light-weight, inexpensive and rust-free. Stainless steel is virtually rust-free and is another popular choice but it is a poor, uneven heat conductor. A stainless steel canner/cook pot should have an added layer of aluminum or copper on the bottom for better heat transfer. Boiling waterbath canning on smooth top ranges generally requires the use of flat-bottomed metal pots that are no larger than the cooking eye surface. Large, deep, flat-bottomed stockpots can be used. Check to make sure that your boiling water canner is free of rust and pinholes and can hold (1) a rack, (2) upright, filled, closed jars and (3) water at a level of 1-2 inches above the top of the jars.

Third, inventory jars and two piece lids.

If properly used and stored, jars can last ten years or longer. As you empty jars during the winter, check for any chips or breaks, wash and store in a safe place. Two-piece lids consist of a flat metal disc and a separate metal ring band. After canning, ring bands should be removed once the jars have sealed, instead of leaving them on the jars during storage. Wash and dry ring bands completely and put them away in a dry place. Bands can be used over and over, unless they rust. The flat lid is used only once and then discarded after the jar of food is opened.

Fourth, collect your tools.

Jar lifters, canning funnels, lid lifters, and headspace tools/bubbler freeers are useful for a busy canner.

With your canning equipment and supplies in good shape, you will be ready for 2014!