

Storing and Drying Produce Safely and Effectively: Fruit Edition

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If you've shopped a local farmer's market recently, you know that there is an abundance of beautiful fruits and vegetables at the ready to take home and enjoy. And while the most delicious preparation of seasonal produce can require the least amount of alteration (tomato sandwich, anyone?), preserving some of the seasonal bounty is a wonderful option to transform a cold winter's day with a nibble of something you preserved from the peak of summer. In Colorado we currently have available to us stone fruits such as peaches, nectarines, apricots, plums and more. And on the heels of these delights, we'll soon see the fruits of fall such as apples and pears while hanging on to the last of the season's melons.

While some people might first think of jams and preserves as the best way to preserve seasonal fruit, another easy and delicious method is dehydrating! My first foray into dehydrating fruit was as a twelve-year-old watching an infomercial for a food dehydrator. I was convinced that I need one to make jerky, fruit roll-ups, soup mixes and more! I convinced my parents to buy me one, and the first thing I dehydrated was apples. To this day, it is still one of my favorite foods to dehydrate, often sprinkled with a little cinnamon or cardamom. The house smells like baked apple pie whenever I make a batch.

To get the best overall dehydrated product, there are several considerations to keep in mind. First, you'll want to select fruit at its peak flavor and quality. Underripe or overripe fruit can lack flavor and color or can be tough and fibrous or soft and mushy. Once fruit is harvested, how you store it before preserving matters. "The storage life of most common fresh fruits and leafy vegetables is highly variable but is usually not much longer than one week in a refrigerator crisper, when wrapped in perforated plastic bags. Moisture can accumulate in unperforated plastic bags, which can lead to growth of mold or bacteria. Some fruits, such as melons, cantaloupe, honeydew, peaches, pears and nectarines, need to be stored at room temperature until ripe. Fruit pieces cut from fully ripe fruit can also be successfully stored in the refrigerator." (*CSU Fact Sheet 7.601 Storage of Home-Grown Vegetables.*)

Next, pretreating fruits before drying is also recommended. It prevents darkening and can speed up drying fruit with naturally tough skins. It can also enhance the destruction of potentially harmful bacteria during drying. To pretreat fruit, wash and cut to a uniform desired size. Then dip them in an ascorbic acid, citric acid, or lemon juice solution. Keep in mind that different fruits have optimal drying times as well as dryness indicators. Refer to the *CSU Fact Sheet 9.309 Drying Fruits* Table 2 for a list of recommendations and timing for pretreatments and drying for each fruit type.

The best dehydrators for home food drying have an adjustable thermostat and a fan that blows warm air over the food. Food should be pretreated, cut into uniform sizes and spread out evenly over the trays without overlapping or crowding. Remember to rotate trays throughout drying for consistency. Fruit scorches easily toward the end of drying so it is recommended to turn off the dehydrator power when drying is almost complete and open the lid for an additional hour before removing pieces. When produce is done drying, make sure to do a dryness test before storage.

When the dried and cooled fruits are ready for storage, pack them in small amounts in clean glass jars or in moisture and vapor proof freezer containers or bags. Label containers with the name of the product and date. Store in a cool, dry, dark place. When properly dried and stored, fruits will keep well for six to twelve months.

Dried fruits are a great snack on the go or can be added to granola, salads, meat dishes and more. Reconstituted fruit or dried fruits are excellent in cobblers, breads, pies, puddings, milk shakes or smoothies and cooked cereals. For more tips refer to the *CSU Fact Sheet Drying Fruits - 9.309*.

For more food preservation information developed by Colorado State University Extension, please visit <https://apps.chhs.colostate.edu/preservesmart/> or download Preserve Smart on your mobile device.

References:

- Jayanty, S. "Storage of Home-Grown Vegetables – 7.601." *Extension*, March 2008, <https://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/yard-garden/storage-of-home-grown-vegetables-7-601/>.
- Kendall, P, and J.Sofos. "Drying Fruits - 9.309." *Extension*, June. 2012, <https://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/nutrition-food-safety-health/drying-fruits-9-309/>.

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