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Living Well

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Plan Ahead for Food Preservation Season

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in home food preservation. Why the popularity? Many consumers believe food prepared at home is healthier and tastes better. They also enjoy preserving what they have grown or purchased from a local farmers market.

If you are considering joining the trend in home food preservation this summer, start by making sure your equipment is in good working condition. Consider the following safety tips:

***Check your canner.** Look over your canner for dents or warping, which could affect heat distribution.

***Examine canning jars.** Rub your finger around the jar rim to feel for chips and cracks. These can prevent the lid from sealing properly. Also, examine the body of the jars for any scratches or cracks. These can cause the jars to break during processing.

***Use clean canning jars.** Before every use, washing empty jars in hot water with detergent and rinse well by hand, or wash in a dishwasher. Jars should be kept hot until ready to fill with food. Putting hot liquid in a cool jar can cause the jar to crack or break.

If you have scale or hard-water film on used canning jars, it can be removed by soaking the jars in a solution containing 1 cup vinegar (5 percent acidity) per gallon of water prior to washing and preheating the jars.

***Use new lids.** Lids for canning jars should only be used once. Check lids for any defects by making sure the flat portion of the lid is new and that the entire seal is present. Rings can be reused, but if they are rusty they should be replaced.

***Check rubber gaskets and valves.** Gaskets and safety plugs should be flexible and soft, not brittle, sticky, or cracked. Also, make sure safety valves and vents are clean and open easily.

***Use safe recipes.** Many people have canning recipes that are passed down from generation to generation. However, with current research, many of the recipes may be unsafe. This may be because of improper acidity, improper processing methods, or length of processing time. Recommended recipes can be found on the National Center for Home Food Preservation website at nchfp.uga.edu. Up-to-date canning information and recipes are also available in the Extension Office.

***Check dial pressure canner gauges for accuracy.** Pressure canners use either a dial gauge or a weighted gauge. Weighted gauges do not require testing. It is important to check dial gauges for accuracy before each canning season. This must be done so that low-acid foods, such as vegetables, meats, fish, and poultry are properly processed to prevent the growth of the bacterium *Clostridium botulinum*. This pathogen causes botulism – a deadly form of food poisoning. Gauges that test more than one pound high or low of the master gauge should be replaced for safety reasons.

Testing of dial pressure canner gauges is available in the Flint Hills Extension District. This service is offered free of charge. To have your gauge tested, stop by or contact our office in Cottonwood Falls at (620) 273-6491 or in Council Grove at (620) 767-5136.