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Living Well

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Preserve Your Summer Tomatoes

A highlight for many during the summer is enjoying fresh picked tomatoes from the garden. Since gardens often produce tomatoes faster than we can eat them, many choose to preserve tomatoes and enjoy them throughout the year. As you prepare to can your tomatoes this summer, consider the following commonly asked questions.

***Is it okay to can damaged tomatoes in order to save them?** The general recommendation is to never can tomatoes with soft spots, broken skin, or decay. Instead, always start with fresh, firm, ripe tomatoes. This will result in a much better product when canned.

***My tomatoes froze on the vines, are they safe to use?** Do not can tomatoes from dead or frost-killed vines. The acid level has changed in the tomato and should not be used for canning. They can be frozen or eaten fresh.

***When canning tomatoes, does lemon juice need to be added?** Yes, when either water bath canning or pressure canning, lemon juice must be added. To ensure a safe acid level in whole, crushed, or juiced tomatoes, add 2 tablespoons of bottled lemon juice or ½ teaspoon of citric acid per quart of tomatoes. For pints, use 1 tablespoon of bottled lemon juice or ¼ teaspoon of citric acid. Acid can be added directly to the jars before filling the jars with

product. Four tablespoons of 5-percent-acidity vinegar per quart may be used instead of lemon juice or citric acid. However, vinegar may cause undesirable flavor changes.

***Can yellow “acid free” tomatoes be used in canning?** Yes. They have the same acid content as red tomatoes but taste less acidic. When canning these tomatoes, use the same method as you would when canning red tomatoes. This holds true for pink, orange, and other colors of ripe tomatoes.

***Can I leave out the salt?** Yes. Salt is used for flavor only and is not necessary to prevent spoilage.

***Can I create my own salsa recipe?** Salsas are usually mixtures of acid and low-acid ingredients; they are an example of an acidified food. The specific recipe, and sometimes preparation method, will determine if a salsa can be processed in a boiling water canner or a pressure canner. A process must be scientifically determined for each recipe. When canning salsa, use only up-to-date tested recipes, such as from the National Center for Home Food Preservation website at nchfp.uga.edu. You can also obtain reliable salsa recipes from both the Extension Office in Council Grove and Cottonwood Falls.

For more information on preserving tomatoes or for reliable recipes, contact the Flint Hills Extension District office in Cottonwood Falls at (620) 273-6491 or the office in Council Grove at (620) 767-5136.