

A FREEZER FULL OF SUMMER

By KIM PIERCE / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News
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You can freeze almost anything if the water content isn't too high. Freezing cucumbers or lettuce, for instance, won't work. But cantaloupe and tomatoes do just fine. Here, we've narrowed the field to popular and abundant seasonal items.

If you plan to freeze more than a batch or two, consider investing in a vacuum sealer, which State Fair winner Peggy Woodard of Greenville swears by. (Ms. Woodard even prepares frozen dinners.) Air and moisture are the enemies of frozen foods, and vacuum sealers, which are widely available starting around \$60, shut out both.

FREEZING TIPS AND BASICS

Choose fruit that is firm and ripe. Before freezing, refrigerate fruit until chilled because cold fruit freezes better. Unless it was grown without pesticides, rinse thoroughly. Pat dry, removing as much moisture as you can.

Most cooks use Fruit-Fresh or a similar product, made primarily of ascorbic acid (vitamin C), to keep fruits such as peaches from turning brown. It works on guacamole, too.

Choose young, tender vegetables and chill immediately. Rinse as if you were preparing them fresh. You'll need to blanch most vegetables to override enzymes responsible for deterioration. Pat dry, removing as much moisture as you can.

If you're using plastic freezer containers, select shapes that let the cold quickly penetrate. A long, flat rectangle is better than a cube. You will need to leave headspace of ¼ inch to ½ inch at the top because food expands as it freezes. (This also will create a space where ice crystals can form, so use plastic containers for foods that won't be frozen long.) Glass jars with rounded shoulders, such as bell jars, are not recommended for freezing. They could break.

If you use plastic zip-top bags, buy those made for freezing. They're heavier than plain zip-top bags. Don't reuse bags, as they can develop tiny holes.

To squeeze the air out of zip-top bags, have a bowl of cool water ready. Pack the bag with fruit or vegetables and squeeze out as much air as you can. Close zipper to within ½ inch of the end. Slowly push the bag into the water, making sure no water gets inside. The water pressure will squeeze out the air. Zip the top closed and remove the bag from the water.

You also can freeze liquids in ice trays, then put the cubes into a plastic bag for longer freezing. This is a great way to freeze sauces and stocks.

Label bags or plastic containers with the name of the contents and the "use by" date.

Joy of Cooking recommends using most frozen fruits and vegetables within six months, which *Joy* notes is a conservative number.

SOURCE: Joy of Cooking: 75th Anniversary Edition by Irma S. Rombauer, Marion Rombauer Becker and Ethan Becker (Scribner, \$35)

Berries

Strawberries, blueberries and blackberries are the easiest fruits to freeze. Rinse (then hull strawberries and blackberries). Pat dry, removing as much moisture as possible. Spread on a baking sheet and freeze. When the berries are frozen, seal them in zip-top plastic freezer bags, according to the directions in Freezing Tips and Basics, label and date. Some sources say they'll keep for up to a year.

Peaches

Method 1: Carol Adamek of Dallas, who has won first place at the State Fair with her cobbler, freezes fresh peaches with a wet-pack sugar method. She peels and slices firm, ripe peaches with a knife, squeezing lemon juice over them as she goes. Then, for every quart of fruit, she mixes ¼ teaspoon Fruit-Fresh with 2 tablespoons water in a bowl. She adds the cut peaches and 2/3 to 1 cup sugar (depending on the sweetness of the fruit), tossing the peaches with her hands. She uses plastic containers, but plastic zip-top freezer bags would work just as well. She says she still has peaches from last summer that are good.

Method 2: Donna Thomas of Dallas won 25 ribbons for her State Fair cooking entries last year. She starts with this basic method for removing skins: Fill a sink with ice water. Cut an X in the bottom of each peach and drop it into boiling water for less than 1 minute. Plunge peaches into the ice water. The skins then should slip off. She holds the peaches in a sink full of water and Fruit-Fresh. Next, she drains the peaches in a colander, slices them and seals 4 cups of fruit in each 1-gallon zip-top plastic freezer bag, laying the filled bags flat to freeze. Some sources say they will keep for up to a year.

Refrigerator or freezer jam with berries or peaches

The basic formula, from the University of Minnesota Extension Service, is 3 cups fruit, 5 cups sugar, 1 package powdered pectin and 1 cup cold water. (Note: Don't reduce the sugar; it's necessary to set the jam. You can find reduced-sugar recipes online.) Sort and wash ripe blackberries, raspberries, blueberries or strawberries. Remove caps and stems from berries. Using the back of a wooden spoon, crush berries in a single layer. Peel peaches and cut them into thin slices.

Mix fruit and sugar together in a bowl and let stand for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally. In a saucepan, dissolve the pectin in cold water and bring to a boil. Boil for 1 minute. Add to fruit and sugar and stir vigorously for 2 minutes. Pour into plastic containers, leaving ½ inch head space. Cover and allow containers to stand for 24 hours at room temperature, or until jam has set and become firm. Refrigerate or freeze. Makes 7 (½ pint) containers. After removing jam from the freezer, thaw overnight in the refrigerator.

Cantaloupe and honeydew

These and similar melons freeze surprisingly well. March Baremore of Dallas has preserved winning blueberries for the State Fair. She says her three boys love melons. If you want to get fancy, you can use a melon baller or cut the peeled and seeded flesh into uniform chunks (about ¾ inch). She places them in zip-top plastic freezer bags, then seals and labels them. You also could freeze them on a baking sheet, then bag them. *Joy of Cooking* recommends serving melons partially thawed.

Okra

Whole: Peggy Woodard of Greenville, who made the best-of-show pie at the 2007 State Fair, uses a Food Saver vacuum seal with her okra, but you also could use a plastic container or zip-top plastic freezer bag, as explained in *Freezing Tips and Basics*. Start by rinsing the okra, then group similar sizes. Blanch pods in boiling water for 3 minutes. The time starts when the water returns to a boil. Plunge into ice water. Pat dry, removing as much moisture as possible. Bag, seal, label and date.

Breaded: "Good old Southern gals do this," Ms. Woodard says. Preheat oven to 350 F and spray a baking sheet with nonstick cooking spray. Rinse and cut okra into wheels. Blanch in boiling water for 1 minute after the water returns to a boil. Plunge into ice water to stop cooking. Pat dry. Dip in buttermilk. Then dip in cornmeal seasoned with salt and pepper to taste. Lay the prepared wheels on the baking sheet. Bake for 15 minutes to set the crust. Remove from oven and allow to cool completely before placing in freezer bags according to directions in *Freezing Tips and Basics*. The okra will be ready to cook in a skillet or fryer.

Peas

This method works with any fresh peas, from black-eyes to lima beans. Shell peas and pick clean. Blanch in boiling water: 1 minute for small peas, 2 minutes for large peas. Timing starts when water returns to a boil. Immediately plunge peas into ice water to stop cooking. Pat dry, removing as much moisture as possible. Pack in plastic containers or plastic zip-top freezer bags, as explained in *Freezing Tips and Basics*. Label and date. Some sources say they will keep for up to a year.

Herbs

Herbs such as dill, sage, rosemary and thyme freeze well while still on the stalk. Make sure they are dry, then freeze an entire bunch in a zip-top plastic bag, squeezing out the air according to the directions in *Freezing Tips and Basics*. For leafy herbs, such as basil, tarragon and parsley, gently rinse and dry leaves. Place on a baking sheet and freeze. After frozen, pack in zip-top plastic freezer bags. Label and date. Use as you would fresh herbs. Some sources say they will keep for up to a year.

Tomatoes

Avoid tomatoes with broken skin. Ripe tomatoes should be fully cooked before freezing. To peel, cut an X on the bottom and drop into boiling water for 1 minute. Plunge into cold water so they will be cool enough to handle. The skins will slide off. Seed and cut into quarters. Simmer in a saucepan, uncovered, to desired thickness. If you want a relatively fresh sauce, cook no longer than 15 minutes. Or, you can reduce the tomatoes to a paste. Cool. Pour into ice cube trays and freeze. Store frozen cubes in zip-top plastic freezer bags according to *Freezing Tips and Basics*. Label and date. Some sources say these will keep for up to a year.