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Inventory Control of Our Preserved Foods

Summer Brasuel

UCCE Master Food Preservers Of El Dorado County

We should all have an annual habit of checking our inventory of preserved foods. Over time things get shuffled around and before we know it our least favorite items get shoved into a dark corner and forgotten. This can happen to our shelf stable canned and dehydrated foods as well as our frozen foods.

The USDA recommends we preserve enough food for one year. This is sound advice, especially for gardeners who often intentionally grow an abundance of produce with the intention of preserving most of it. Why is one year recommended? Here are a few reasons:

- The obvious reason is because in a year another crop will be available for preserving. Year after year, our preserved foods may accumulate to the breaking point when there is no longer shelf space and old products start looking unappealing and must be thrown away.
- Although foods preserved using tested recipes and science-based methods will last many, many years they still deteriorate in the jar. After a year (sometimes less, sometimes a bit more) the color of the product may fade. The top layer may oxidize and have an off color. It is still safe to eat, but not as visually appealing.

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- Over time the nutritional value of our product is reduced.
- The texture of some products can become soft and unpleasant.
- After a year flavors start to fade. Some herbs and spices can become bitter and make a product taste unpleasant. Or, some herbs can lose their flavor and then we are disappointed when we eat it. It is still safe, just not tasty. The seeds in a blackberry jam that is several years old may cause a grassy taste that is unpleasant. Those pickled cherries that are 5 years old have a mushy texture. A plum jam with orange zest may become unpleasantly bitter - ask me how I know these things!

Of course, this is not always the case. If a product looks good, but is a few years old, open a jar and taste it. If it still tastes good then, by all means keep it. But make an effort to use those older products sooner than later.

Early spring is a good time to check your inventory. Eat the older products now or share with friends and family. Plan your preserving projects and your garden based on what is on hand already. Maybe you still have another years worth of tomato products in your inventory. You may decide to only grow a couple of tomato plants for eating fresh. Maybe one row of green beans will suffice. Remember to check any dehydrated products you have in your pantry, and the frozen products in your freezer.

Don't waste food and don't waste your time by preserving more than your family and friends can eat. There is always next season!