

Preserving the Art of Canning Safely at Home

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In 1943, 20 million households raised Victory Gardens, and all those vegetables weren't eaten fresh. Steel was directed to pressure-cooker production instead of munitions, and a massive effort was made to educate people in the skill of canning. "Department stores ran films and displays on canning, society ladies enrolled in classes on it, home economists lectured on it to ladies' clubs, extension agents demonstrated it to farmers' wives, and charities taught it in the slums," wrote food historian Harvey Levenstein in "Paradox of Plenty."

Gardening is wildly popular again and canning is, too. But how is the need for education on safely canning at home being met? A combination of grassroots, government-sponsored and industry initiatives is meeting the increased interest in canning head-on with demos, tools and instructions.

Jarden Home Brands, the parent company of Ball canning books and equipment, experienced double digit growth in the first years of the recession. The company capitalized on the trend by offering a [Home Canning Discovery Kit](#), which has all the tools needed to make a three pint batch in a boiling water bath, using a stock pot that might be found in any kitchen.

"We also continue to do more education programs, increasing our presence with the extension service offices," said Brenda Schmidt, brand manager at Jarden Home Brands.

Publisher of ["The Ball Blue Book,"](#) long the standard of safe home canning, Jarden partners with cooperative extension offices throughout the country, supplying samples, coupons and literature to the food preservation specialists who teach home canning to consumers.

A program called House Party is designed to get people interested in canning and learn it with friends and families at home, with the help of guided literature and the videos provided to the party host, explained Schmidt. This year the company is also partnering with the [Canning Across America](#) organization, which has proclaimed Aug. 13 "Can It Forward" day.

Canning Across America includes cooks, food lovers and gardeners bound by their desire to revive the lost art of canning. Determined to do so safely, the group emphasizes specific techniques and often uses Master Food Preservers in demonstrations.

"We talk about pH and what you can safely can in a water bath, what you need to can in a pressure cooker," said founder Kim O'Donnel, food writer and author of "The Meat Lover's Meatless Cookbook."

"I learned on the spot by practicing over and over again, but going very slowly, because I wanted to understand, 'so why is it that you have to sterilize a jar?' All these little things are equally important to get the proper seal. (And things like not) Dating your jar -- that's a very common mistake of first-time canners. A year is about as long as you want to hang on to something."

The group came together in 2009 when O'Donnel heard about canning classes in the San Francisco Bay area. In Seattle, she Twittered about the event, and proposed a series of days to focus on Americans canning. Now in its third year, Canning Across America connects canners live and online, and Jarden will be very involved in events on Aug. 13, especially at The Pike Place Market. Webcasts will draw in people who don't have events in their locale.

The Internet is an important stage for presenting resources on home canning. Jarden, Canning Across America, and the National Center for Home Food Preservation feature how-to videos and documents on their sites.

[The National Center for Home Food Preservation](#) represents a decade of USDA-funded research carried out at the University of Georgia.

The USDA has offered home canning and other home food preservation recommendations since the early 1900s. By the end of the century, it was time to review what was available. Extension agents on faculty at the University of Georgia applied for and received two grants that ran five years to cover the topic.

"We were asked to do a literature review of a lot of the research that happened since the last major work at USDA, and determine some needs to do some more product development for their canning guides," said Elizabeth Andress, professor and Extension Food Safety Specialist. "We developed probably 30-plus new canning recommendations, and we produced a video series. We produced the website, and the offerings on that include a free online course, and various outreach methods to help get out information from the USDA recommendations, also."

They updated and revised the [USDA Complete Guide to Home Canning](#), which is available in print and online at multiple sites. December 2009 is the most current version.

These recommendations are followed closely as Ball develops new recipes based on consumer interests. In its own test kitchen and using offsite labs, too, Jarden looks at elements like pH, canner size, jar size, and how to prep ingredients. Additionally, it has labs analyze the processes.

"What we do is collect data, and that's just heat penetration data to ensure that the time it takes to heat the product, the coolest spot in the jar is achieved and it's hot enough and kept at the temperature long enough to kill the target microorganisms," said Lauren Devine, Test Kitchen Scientist. Her name appears on some Ball titles. "We have to make sure that we're killing the target microorganisms, as well as removing the air from the jar so you can essentially get a vacuum seal, and everything inside has been killed."

Tools like Ball's cookbooks and the USDA Complete Guide to Home Canning offer concrete directions through a process that can seem mystifying. Saving food in a jar is almost magical, allowing you to have a piece of June in January. However, organizations like Canning Across America emphasize the importance of learning the process without getting swept away by the wonder of the transformative act.

"You can add basil to your strawberry jam and that's wonderful, but that's not how you should be learning to can. You should be focusing on the methodology," said Kim O'Donnel.

Another organization that's taking on the business of teaching people to safely can is Seattle Tilth, a gardening education group that is now offering a Master Food Preserver Course.

Extension offices stopped offering Master Food Preserver courses in Western Washington, and Seattle Tilth got permission to use the term, and offer its own certification. A pilot course last year was successful.

"The class maxes out at 20 because we're in a teaching kitchen and we want to be able to have everyone do hands-on learning. Also we're doing teach-backs because this certification is meant as a training for people who want to teach canning and food preservation in their community," said Carey Thornton, who co-teaches the classes, adding that the curriculum includes instruction on how to be an educator.

This is a unique arrangement. Traditionally, Cooperative Extension Services offer "master" programs through state or county-run offices.

"Extension sees a master program as volunteer development," explained Elizabeth Andress. "In exchange for this intensive training and constant updating and education, we consider the people we train as volunteers who will then give something back to extension, whether it be manning exhibits, writing newspaper columns, taking phone calls in the office or whatever."

Andress sees the expectations of the master programs as one of a kind, in that the volunteers are invested in sharing their information and developing community knowledge on the subject. She understands why, because of budget constraints, many extension offices are dropping their Master Food Preservers certification programs.

"You can't run a Master Food Preserver program in your state if you don't have the expertise to back it up and answer people's questions and train them appropriately," she said. Her state has 159 counties, but only 35 family and consumer science agent positions serving them.

"I have lots of individuals calling me, (and saying) our extension office no longer offers Master Food Preserver, or there's no agent in our county, so I'm teaching classes, which I think is great and shows the interest," said Andress. "Sometimes I'm a little bit concerned about what they're teaching because obviously, me being in the job I'm in, I really care that people teach the best practices with some research-based recommendations and don't just proliferate what people did 80 years ago."

Funding is an issue at The National Center for Home Food Preservation. The grant period ended last August. While faculty are keeping the website up to date, there's not the same activity involved as over the last decade. Announcement of a round of funding for USDA food safety programs came last week, and though the RFP is not yet available, Andress is optimistic.

"I just hoping there's going to be a category in there that supports this kind of work we've been doing, as well as applied research and outreach to consumers," she said.