

Drying Fruit, Vegetables and Herbs

DRYING as a method of preservation has been used from the earliest times. In the early days, fish, meat, fruit and vegetables were dried by making use of the sun and wind, and in parts of Africa, Australia, California and certain areas of France, sun-drying is still carried out. In countries where the atmosphere contains more moisture, it is satisfactory to carry out the process in machines which are so constructed that the temperature, humidity and air distribution can be controlled easily.

The drying of fruit and vegetables in the home can be done quite simply. The two requirements are correct temperature and movement of air (ventilation). No expensive apparatus is involved. Trays are required on which to lay the fruit and vegetables; these may be purchased, or may be constructed by nailing together in a square 4 wooden laths and stretching wire gauze or cheese-cloth across the framework. If wire trays are used, they should be protected by loose pieces of cheese-cloth or muslin in order to prevent the fruit taking the imprint of the wire mesh. If new cheese-cloth is used as the foundation of the tray or simply to cover the wire gauze, it should be washed to remove the dressing which scorches easily.

Drying can be done in the oven, which should be only moderately warm; the spare heat in a solid fuel oven or stove may be utilized after cooking is over. This probably means that the process cannot be continuous and that it will have to be carried out on several days, but fruit does not suffer to any appreciable extent. Where oven heat can be regulated easily the process can be carried out continuously or intermittently according to the general use of the oven. The rack over a coal range can also be used, provided the fruit and vegetables are protected from dust; or racks may be made for drying over a hot-water cistern. This has the advantage of a fairly even temperature. Apart from correct temperature, it is important that there is movement of air.

FRUIT

As in other methods of preservation it is very important to use perfectly fresh, ripe fruit. Ripe fruits dry more quickly than unripe ones, retain a better colour and have a much better flavour. The fruit should be prepared according to its kind (peeled, cored, etc.), laid on the trays and dried at a temperature between 120° and 150°F. The fruit should be heated slowly at first to prevent the outside hardening. Such hardening prolongs the process by preventing evaporation of moisture from the centre of the fruit; also, in the case of plums, if the heat is too great at the outset the skins burst. When the fruit is removed from the oven it should be exposed to ordinary room temperature for 12 hr while it cools. It should then be packed in wooden or cardboard boxes lined with greasproof paper and stored in a very dry place. It should not be stored in air-tight containers.

APPLES on the whole stand drying well, but this method should not be used except for windfalls and those varieties which do not keep well by the usual method of storing. Windfalls can be preserved quite satisfactorily by drying.

The fruit must be carefully peeled and cored, all blemishes removed, and cut into rings of $\frac{1}{4}$ in. thickness.

The apple rings should immediately be placed in a basin of salt water (2 oz salt to 1 gal water) for a few minutes, as this helps to prevent discoloration. The fruit should be removed from the water, superfluous moisture shaken off and the rings arranged in single layers on trays, or threaded on sticks which can be laid across the trays and placed near the kitchen fire or in a cool oven at a temperature of not more than 140°F. If the process can be a continuous one the rings should be dry in about 4 to 6 hr. If the rings are dried at the end of the day when the stove heat is dying down, drying may continue intermittently over a period of 2 or 3 days. When the fruit is sufficiently dry the texture should resemble that of chamois leather, and if a handful of rings are pressed firmly together the slices should be springy enough to separate at once on being released from the hand. When they have reached this stage they should be removed from the oven and left for 12 hr, then packed and stored in a dry place.

PEARS should be peeled, cored, cut into quarters or eighths, then placed at once in salt water as for apples and later dried on trays.

PLUMS. Fleshy, dark skinned varieties such as Belle de Louvain and Pond's Seedling are suitable for drying. The fruit should be washed if necessary, laid on muslin-covered trays and dried in an oven at a temperature of 120°F. If the heat is too strong at first the skins burst and much of the juice is lost. The temperature should be kept low until the skins begin to shrivel and then raised gradually to 150°F, which temperature should be maintained until the drying process is finished. To test if a plum is sufficiently dry, it should be squeezed between the fingers very gently; if the skin does not break or exude juice, the drying process need not be continued and the fruit should be removed from the oven, left for 12 hr and then packed and stored for use.

SMALL FRUITS AND BERRIES. These become unattractive in colour, do not regain their original size when soaked before cooking and are generally unsuitable for drying.

Preparing Dried Fruits for Use

Failure to make dried fruits appetizing is usually due to insufficient soaking before cooking and to adding the sugar too early. Dried fruits require long soaking (24 to 48 hr) in plenty of water. They should then be allowed to come to boiling point slowly in the water in which they were soaked and boiled gently until the fruit is plump and tender. The sugar should be added a few minutes before cooking is completed.