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“Dehydrated Food Preservation”

Dehydrated foods are making their way into more kitchens as home equipment becomes increasingly affordable. There are many options for tabletop food dehydrators in a wide variety of price ranges, depending on the features and size of the appliance. Karen Blakeslee, coordinator of K-State’s Rapid Response Center for Food Science, explains that a food dehydrator works by using heat and circulating air to lower the food’s moisture content to about 20 percent, allowing it to be safely stored at room temperature.

Before dehydrating, food should be rinsed and prepared properly. Most vegetables need to be blanched either by steaming or boiling in water. Blanching stops the enzyme action that can cause loss of color and flavor during drying and storage. It also shortens drying and rehydration time by relaxing the tissue walls so that moisture can escape and later re-enter more rapidly. Fruits often require pre-treatment to prevent browning. Options include ascorbic acid, lemon juice, honey or sugar syrups, or steam blanching. The best method varies depending on the fruit. For meat, safety is a top concern. Beef jerky and other dried meats must be heated to at least 160 degrees Fahrenheit to destroy harmful bacteria such as *E. coli*.

Food that is properly dehydrated, stored in airtight containers, and kept in a cool, dark, dry place can last for months. Dried foods kept at 60 degrees Fahrenheit can keep for up to one year, while foods stored at 80 degrees shortens shelf life to about six months. Fruit leathers should keep for up to one month at room temperature. To store dried products longer, place them in the freezer.

According to Blakeslee, choosing between dehydrating or canning food often comes down to personal preference and available storage space. Dehydrating food typically takes less space, but it does take more time. Freeze drying is another food preservation method growing in popularity. It better preserves nutrients and offers a longer shelf life, around 20 to 30 years, when stored properly. However, freeze-drying does not kill bacteria that are already present. Freeze-dried foods are extremely dry, with 90 to 95 percent of the moisture removed. Once rehydrated, they are similar in nutritional value to fresh foods. As more families explore food preservation at home, dehydrating continues to grow in popularity, offering a simple and effective way to keep nutritious food on hand year-round.

Information comes from Kansas State University Publications.

Join us for a hands-on nutrition series where kids in 2nd–5th grades will learn about building balanced plates, choosing healthy snacks, and making smart food choices. Each session includes a fun, easy recipe they can prepare and enjoy! Sessions will be held at Eureka Methodist Church on Oct. 14 from 4:30–5:30 PM. To sign up, please contact the Extension Office.