

Canning Tomatoes: A Word of Caution

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Now that summer is here, most home gardeners are busily tending to things, and looking forward to a bountiful harvest with great anticipation. One of the staples, of course, is tomatoes. Every year, it seems that all the tomatoes ripen at once, which presents gardeners with the pleasant dilemma of “What do I do with all these tomatoes?” Even after toasted bacon, tomato and lettuce sandwiches; and a great run of tasty salads, there may still be tomatoes ripening on the vines. This is where canning comes to the rescue.

Instructions for canning tomatoes are available in various cookbooks and on the Internet. Essentially, these methods involve washing and peeling the tomatoes, and placing them in glass jars which are filled with juice from the tomatoes, and perhaps boiling water, as well as various other ingredients. Individual recipes and instructions will vary. The filled jars are then heat-processed in a water-bath canner.

All jars should be free of chips or cracks and be thoroughly cleaned before use. Tight fitting lids which form a secure seal are an absolute must.

As simple as it sounds, problems may literally be lurking just below the surface of these canned tomatoes. Although many of you are experienced in the art of canning, and are probably familiar with this, it may be a good idea to re-emphasize some of more important points.

In food processing terms, there are two distinct types of products which must be considered when canning: namely, “high acid” and “low acid”. We won’t go into the chemistry of pH and acidity; nor delve into the microbiology of *Clostridium botulinum*, a microorganism which can cause “botulism”. However, we do need to look at certain precautions you should take when processing low acid foods.

For safety’s sake, it is best to treat tomatoes as a low acid product, even though some varieties may be the exception.

High acid products include strawberries, sour cherries, and citrus fruits. With each of these, there is generally enough acid naturally present to prevent the growth of any spores that survive the heat treatment step. With low acid foods, this is not the case. One way of addressing this potential problem is to use higher processing temperatures which can only be achieved by using a pressure cooker or canners. To some, pressure cookers or canners may be somewhat intimidating, or an unwelcomed expense.

A second method of handling low acid products is to add some acidic material to each batch as you are canning. Bottled lemon juice may be the most convenient acid source to use. Powdered citric acid is also acceptable, since it is the acidic component of lemon juice. Books such as “Canning and Preserving for Dummies” recommend adding two tablespoons of lemon juice, or half a teaspoon of powdered citric acid per quart jar of tomatoes.

Using pressure cookers or canners, plus the addition of acid, should give you an extra level of confidence for the safety of your canned goods. This creates two hurdles to the potential growth of microorganisms – one is the heat treatment, and the other is the acidity.

Regardless of the recipe you use for canned tomatoes, be sure to have a high level of cleanliness, while maintaining the recommended heating times, temperatures, and acidity levels. The safety of the canned tomatoes depends upon the correct combination of these factors. Above all - never take shortcuts.



Tomatoes are a staple in most home gardens