

Transcript Ep. 23: Preserving Your Summer Produce

Introduction:

You are listening to the UnDeniably Well podcast hosted by the University of Delaware's Employee Health and Wellbeing team. Keep listening to discover ways to be your best self each and every day.

On this episode of UnDeniably Well, we are going to focus on physical wellbeing and food. This time of year gardens and produce are booming. Instead of letting all that nutritious food go to waste, we will learn how to preserve produce to carry us through the winter months.

Ryan Shuler:

Hi, I'm Ryan Shuler, the Associate Director of Employee Health and Wellbeing at the University of Delaware. Today I have Jen Muzzi a Nutrition Outreach Coordinator for our program here at Employee Health and Wellbeing. Jen is a chef and registered dietitian. And today we are going to be talking about how to preserve your produce. So welcome Jen!

Jen Muzzi:

Thank you, Ryan, longtime listener, first time caller. Appreciate you having me.

Ryan Shuler:

So I actually am selfishly interested in this topic. We did not do a garden this year, since my family just moved. But in the past, we have had so much of our own produce that we harvest that we can't eat it all. And we end up throwing a lot of it out, or I try to pass it off to my mom, but she has her own garden, so she doesn't want it either. So what are there things that we can do to sort of either preserve it or just, what else can we do to hold us over through sort of the fall and winter months and, and use all this extra produce?

Jen Muzzi:

Sure. So I get asked this question actually a lot around this time of year when everybody's gardens are like exploding with tomatoes and things like that. They're like, what could I do? What could I do? And there are so many great recipes that you can use out there for fresh tomatoes, you know, right here and right now, but if you're looking to do like preserving and keeping for like the winter or later on, or if you, if you can't find somebody to give it to, then good options are canning or jarring and freezing the produce that you get. So tomatoes are a little tricky because they're actually high acid, but they're really low acid when you talk about canning procedures. So you have to make sure that you do that properly for your own safety because we definitely don't want botulism or anything like that happening, right. So one of the great websites that I referred to when I was doing some of my canning stuff and jarring during the pandemic, the Cooperative Extension at UD has a fantastic site where you can look up a lot of different recipes and different pointers and stuff like that too. But it also links to the National Center for Home Food Preservation, and that has all the guidelines that you could possibly need for all the different canning and jarring needs.

Ryan Shuler:

So we can link for listeners both of those websites in the show notes. If you just kind of scroll down there, we can link to both of those pages. And I want to ask when you can or jar things, do they have to be refrigerated or they're preserved so they can stay in your cabinet?

Jen Muzzi:

So when they're jarred or canned and preserved, they can stay in the cabinet until you open them. Once you open them, you have to refrigerate them.

Ryan Shuler:

Okay. That makes more sense. When we used to live in a, like a 200 year old home up in New York, and there was a huge root cell just with like so many shelves where I assume that's where they kept everything, but it was cool. It was always cool down there. You know, it was New York. It snowed six months a year, so it's always chilly up there, but I didn't know, you know, sort of in this area and like the tri-state area, if you could still keep it in your cabinet. So that's good to know.

Jen Muzzi:

You can definitely keep these products in your pantry, but if you have a house that like gets hot, or if you don't have AC or anything like that, then that is something that you would probably want to be careful of. You know, my grandmother... I'm from Albany, New York originally, you know, I remember my grandmother having all of her stuff in the cellar as well, too. So you don't have to necessarily keep it at a certain temperature or below, but you definitely don't want it to get too hot. So I guess, you know, you really don't want it to go too much over into the seventies or higher, you know, so if you have a very warm house, then you might want to consider putting it somewhere where it will stay a little bit cooler, you know, once it's preserved and stuff because the canning process itself should help protect it. But you, again, you just never want to risk it getting too hot.

Ryan Shuler:

Right. That makes sense. And what about freezing? How do you, do you freeze a vegetable whole or are you supposed to sort of chop it up as you would use it first and then freeze it that way?

Jen Muzzi:

So as far as freezing you, you, you really don't want to put the entire vegetable in fresh, like for instance, zucchini, you don't want to keep that zucchini and just throw that squash right in the freezer like that. The best thing to do is to, well, first of all, wash it off, even though it comes from your own garden. Give it a little rinse, pat it dry, and you want to cut off the root and cut off the end and then, you know, chop it up, however you like. But the important thing to do with it is to, when you cut them up, get like a big cookie sheet or sheet pan or something, and layer that with some, either wax paper or Parchment or aluminum foil or something, or you can just put them straight on there, straight on the pan, and separate them just slightly, but line them up on that sheet pan.

And then stick that in the freezer first. And you only have to do that for probably like, you know, maybe an hour or two, because it won't take too long for them to freeze depending on how thick your bigger

chunks are. So once that's done, then you can kind of toss them into a baggy and keep them stored that way for up to six months or even a year, depending on your freezer, temperature and stuff.

The reason to do that is because if you put them all in a baggy. You know, in big chunks and just one big bag, it's going to turn into a massive frozen lump of chunked up vegetables. And you're, it's not going to work out well for you. , if you throw the entire vegetable in there, especially squash or zucchini, it's when you defrost, it it's just going to be mush in the middle. It's gonna be no good. So I always recommend doing it that way. Cutting it up, do a pre freeze or a par freeze and then stick them in a baggy and label them that way. And when you do put them in the bag, try to push out as much air as possible and, you know, try to get them as flat as you can. So you might have to break it up into a couple different baggies to make sure that it's all, you know, fits well in your freezer and stuff.

Ryan Shuler:

So when you cook something frozen, do you need to thaw first or can you just throw it right in the pan and sauté it from frozen?

Jen Muzzi:

So you can go ahead and sauté it from frozen. Also, it kind of also depends on the vegetable too. I like to kind of give mine a little bit of like a, I just like to let it defrost a little bit on the counter. So it's not like totally frozen, frozen solid, because it can get a lot of like, it can shoot out a lot of extra water. But you know, again, it depends on that vegetable or whatever it is. You have frozen berries and things like that. If you're going to freeze those, I really recommend that you use them in like a smoothie or if you cook them because, you know, eating them fresh, they're gonna be a little mushy regardless because you know, they don't really hold up that texture of freshness as well when they're frozen, but it doesn't mean that they're not usable. So, you know, use them in, you know, like a cobbler or make a preserve out of them or jam or something like that is what I would recommend with fruit.

Ryan Shuler:

So I know we're talking about this in the sense of your own personal garden, but I assume you could do the same thing if you're visiting any of your local farmer's markets or local orchards, where we could still sort of buy in bulk and stock up while it's fresh, right. So it's not like, you know, I just always think of, if I'm grocery shopping with my kids and it's, you know, March, that's not really apple season and there's still, you know, perfect apples that come from who knows where versus we go down the road to Milburn Orchard and pick our own apples in the fall. So I just to sort of support some local entities, I guess you could do the same process, right? Where you're just going to a local farmer's market, buy some things in bulk and then still freeze jar as you would, as if it came from your own garden.

Jen Muzzi:

That's absolutely true. You know, I teach a class at UD under Behavioral Health and Nutrition, it's called Sustainability and Food. And that's one of the big things that I love to push is the local farms and buying as local as you possibly can. You know, not only does it taste better, but it also helps to support our local farmers who, especially during the pandemic had a hard. Soapbox all over. Yeah, you can absolutely do that with any of those products. You know, if you're at the grocery store, if you're, you know, if you buy in bulk at Costco or BJ's or something like that, you know? Yeah. You can absolutely do the same thing

with those sorts of products too. Of course, I'm going to promote going to our local farmer's market and such instead, you know. Apples are definitely kind of hard to freeze. The only thing that I recommend for those is really, you know, try to eat them in hand as much as you can and/or turn them into apple sauce and save that for later on, because yeah, when it is spring and we're getting all the apples and stuff from, you know, South America, you know, it's not exactly the most sustainable for our environment. But it is pretty amazing though, if you think about it with the technology and the way things are in the world at this point that we can get all these fresh produce and stuff, you know, at all times of the year.

Ryan Shuler:

Yeah, and I think it's, I like that you're sort of nod to sustainability. So one of the things that we try to focus on is like wellbeing in the sense of people, place and planet. So when you're really thinking about that planet piece and the sustainability piece, you know, for those listening, who work at UD, who are in this area, Delaware, I feel like, is like, it's just farm country, you know, it's agriculture from top to bottom. So there are so many different cool places you can find. And then I live in Chester County, so we're in Amish Country where there's, you know, produce markets everywhere. So I think that it might take a little research or trial and error to travel to the different ones that you like and sort of figure out where you like to go and price, you know, what you feel comfortable paying with. But if you find a good spot where you know, you're going to get good quality produce, it's well worth it to continue to go there for sure.

Jen Muzzi:

Oh, yeah, absolutely. And that's one of the things that my husband actually loves to promote that Delaware is centrally located on the Eastern seaboard. You know, we've got Philadelphia, we have Baltimore, we've got Amish country, we've got the beach, we've got, you know, the bay. There's so much that's all right here. So there's so much that you can do and buy that's just from this area to support our little area here in the world, you know? So another thing too is, you know, I also get asked a lot about farmer's markets or local produce, or where is there one or how do I find one here and there?

agriculture.delaware.gov has a list of farmer's markets by county. So, you know, New Castle County has a handful of them that are seasonal. Kent county, they only have like listed one or two or something in Kent county. Kind of crazy to me because it's so close to Sussex county, but Sussex county is really truly our agricultural center in Delaware. I mean, there is a ton of farms down south there. And really when you think about it, it's, you know, an hour and a half away, then there's that local farmer right there, that you can get stuff from. That's amazing. There's so many people that might not necessarily have that ability, and we definitely need to embrace that and you know, it's good for our health. It's good for, you know, our local economy. And it's also good for the environment because you're keeping everything as local as possible. You know, you're not traveling so far. You're not bringing things in on trains and trucks and stuff from across the country that is promoting more emissions and all that sort of stuff, right. So, you know, it's great to really focus on that aspect of helping to stick with your local guys as much as possible, and then keeping all of that, those fruits and vegetables and doing what you can to preserve them and save them so that you can enjoy them later on in the winter and in the spring, you know, just to get us through everything.

Ryan Shuler:

Yeah, and I will just add, I know that for many listening, this can feel very time consuming or very overwhelming, and I will share sort of as a similar process, when I had my first daughter, I tried to, you know, not buy store bought baby food. I really tried to focus on going to our local farmer's markets, buying everything she needed. Pureeing it, steaming it, whatever. And I was just so overwhelmed by all of it because I did not have the right system or the right process. And I was not in the right head space to do it. With my son, it was like a no brainer. Like I would spend maybe an hour or two on a Sunday and would be able to bang out a couple different things for him.

So sort of in that same process, if you can just find, you know, dedicate a couple hours here or there, it's not like we need to be spending significant time in our life doing this. You just go by what you need in bulk. You have your process, you have your plan, you have your equipment that you need. And then again on a Sunday or Saturday afternoon, whenever you have time, you can just spend some time and set yourself up for success down the road. So it does not have to be as time consuming and overwhelming as it may seem. So with that, Jen, I just really want to thank you. I think this is really helpful. I think a lot of people are sort of focused a lot on the sustainability and local effort now, so this is really great information. As we're talking about our farmers markets, our own gardens, you know, just how can we continue to eat healthy and be well throughout the whole year. So I really appreciate you being here. And we always close out with asking our guests, what do you do to keep yourself undeniably well?

Jen Muzzi:

As a chef and dietitian, I'm sure you can guess that I try to eat well and try to do all these things that I just talk to about, you know, shopping locally, taking care of my own stuff, but I tell you lately, one of the great things that's really been helping me is journaling. I know it sounds kind of like, I don't know, hokey or whatever, but it really helps me to kind of get, like, I just feel like there's so much going on in the world, in the country. And just, even in our own little area, you know, with so much violence and so many things going on and still lingering on this pandemic that I find that sometimes just writing things out of my brain, kind of just helps me, helps calm my mind, helps just get that crazy sort of scenarios out of my brain and just really helps me emotionally just to kind of be like, okay, that's done and that's out of there. What do I need to do now? And it gives me that time to take that breath and really just get my focus back into the here and now

Ryan Shuler:

I love that. So a whole podcast on physical wellbeing and food, and she closes it out with a little, a little blip of mental wellbeing for us. So we're well balanced over here. So thank you very much. I appreciate it, and for those listening, if you do work at UD, check out our programs page, some of Jen's HealthyU classes will be there. So if you ever want to meet Jen in person, you can do one in her classes. And with that, have a wonderful day

Outro:

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