

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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May 12, 2011

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With all the fresh produce in the area this time of year, many people are taking advantage of good prices and top quality by freezing extras for future use. After all, what's not to like about pulling a package of tomatoes, home-frozen at their best of flavor ripeness, out of the freezer for some special spaghetti sauce? But what happens if you pull that package out and it turns into watery soup when it thaws? Or those bright green beans come out smelling like a freshly mowed lawn! Then it's a waste of money or time. Here are some important tips on how to get the best quality from your home-frozen foods.

Most recommendations for freezing fresh vegetables say that they should be blanched first. Green peppers and onions are two that don't need to be blanched, but others will be much better if they are. Blanching (or scalding) vegetables means dipping them in boiling water or holding them in steam for a short period of time. It's not completely cooking them, just a short dip. Then the veggies should be dipped in ice water to chill quickly and stop the cooking. As soon as they're cold the vegetables should be drained, then packed into bags or containers and frozen.

The short cooking when veggies are blanched is just enough to stop enzyme action. When vegetables are cut enzymes start changing things inside. Some break down pectin in the cell walls. That means that the vegetables get soft and mushy, or tomatoes will separate. Corn will lose its sweetness because enzymes turn sugar into starch. Green beans, sweet corn and other vegetables can develop strange flavors or

smell like fresh hay. Asparagus can get tough and stringy. Mushrooms turn dark. None of these changes are dangerous and they won't make you sick. But they take away the quality of fresh vegetables. Who wants a plate that smells like fresh grass?

Blanching also helps preserve the food value of vegetables. Without blanching the enzymes will also break down vitamins, especially when the vegetable is cut, peeled, sliced or chopped for freezing.

Different vegetables have recommendations for different blanching times. That's because some need more heat to stop their enzymes the whole way into the center of each piece. Some can be blanched either in boiling water or in steam. Mushrooms should only be blanched in steam because they get too soggy if they're boiled.

Blanching for too short a time won't do the job that's needed. But boiling for too long will make food too soft and mushy, will destroy vitamins and can carry away some of the minerals as well. Get directions from my office (the phone number's at the top of this column), and follow them as closely as possible for best quality.

Another important factor for keeping your frozen food top quality is to choose the right packaging. If you use zipper-seal bags or plastic wrap, be sure to use freezer weight, not sandwich weight. Plastic boxes or cartons should be the kind for freezing. Light weight plastic allows too much air to move through the package. This promotes freezer burn. Freezer burn won't make the food dangerous, but it certainly lowers the quality.

Don't put too much warm food in the freezer at one time. Give each batch time to freeze before the next layer of bags is added. Finally, remember that foods in a 'frost free' or automatic defrost freezer will lose their top quality faster than foods in a

deep freeze. If your freezer is a frost free type, plan to move foods in and out within 4-6 months. The longer they stay the poorer the quality will be. But in any freezer, as long as the freezer's on and the food stays frozen, they will be safe!

Here's a dinner made from frozen veggies. You can bake it in the oven or heat in the microwave until heated through and bubbling. If you prefer add 2 tsp of Italian or taco seasoning to the soup. Make a salad, heat some rolls, and dinner will be ready.

Dinner from the Freezer

1 10-oz pkg frozen whole kernel corn	1 10-oz pkg frozen peas and carrots
1 10-oz pkg frozen green beans	3 Tbsp chopped onion
1 can reduced fat condensed soup, cream of mushroom, celery or chicken	
1 tsp salt and ¼ tsp pepper	1 ½ lbs ham or Canadian bacon

Preheat oven to 400°F. Slice ham or bacon into individual serving pieces. Combine frozen vegetables in greased 3-qt baking or microwave safe dish. Sprinkle onions, salt, pepper and seasoning if using over top. Spread soup over vegetables. Cover with foil and bake 40 minutes. Remove foil, stir vegetables. Arrange ham or bacon over top. Return to oven for 10 minutes. Turn meat over and bake another 10 minutes. Serves 8.