

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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Home Made and Sugar Free

It's strawberry jam time, and quick sweet pickles and maybe some frozen fruits too. We have fresh fruits and vegetables available, time to preserve some of them at home for future use. But are you thinking "I don't want to use *that much sugar!*" when you read the instructions in the box of pectin? Seven cups of sugar to make 8 jars of jam seems like an awful lot!

If you've made the mistake of trying to use sugar substitute with regular pectin, even if it's Splenda® that's "Made from sugar", you know it doesn't work the same. You ended up with fruit syrup instead of jam. It works well on pancakes and ice cream, but not to spread on breakfast toast.

So, can you make sugar-free at home, or must you buy the commercial product? First, take a look at the ingredients in commercial sugar free products. There are various ways to make something labeled as 'sugar free'.

Some contain thickeners such as xanthan gum or carrageenan. These are natural ingredients, completely safe, but not what you can find on the grocery store for your home kitchen. These are necessary because regular pectin must have sugar to gel. Without the sugar something else has to be added to thicken or 'set' the preserve. The product is sugar-free or reduced sugar, but it's not thickened with pectin.

Some products are sweetened with fruit concentrates or juice concentrates. While they are technically free of added sugar, the end result is that they still have the

same amount of sugar. It's been added as concentrated fruit or juice, rather than plain sugar. It doesn't have to be labeled as 'sugar' in the ingredient list, but the number of calories and carbs will be almost identical.

Then there are those products that use low-cal sweeteners. Some use xylitol, a sugar alcohol, and some now are using sucralose, or Splenda®. These often just list 'pectin' in the ingredient list. What we can't tell from the label is that this is a specially purified type of pectin that will gel without any sugar.

Regular SureJel® or Certo®, even SugarJel® Lite, must have sugar and acid to set. Without enough of both the pectin can't work. But some pectin has been specially purified so that it will set without sugar. The most commonly available brand for home use that doesn't need sugar is Mrs. Wages Light Home Jel® but there are others such as Ball's No Sugar Fruit Jell®, and SlimSet® might still be available. Some stores in our area carry them. These pectins don't have to have real sugar in there. So yes, with them, you can make sugar-free or low-sugar jams and preserves at home.

Be warned however. Sugar does more in fruit preserves than make it set. Sugar is also what helps preserve the color. Strawberry jams made with less (SureJel Lite®) or no (Mrs Wages Lite®) sugar will not stay bright red. Within several months they will start turning brown. Sugar is also the preservative that prevents mold growth. Preserves made without sugar will be more likely to spoil if stored on the shelf.

Keeping them in the refrigerator will help protect the color as well as prevent mold growth. If you don't have the space, freeze the fruit without sugar now. Then make your preserves in small batches throughout the year as you need them. Or, use gelatin as the thickener and store it in the refrigerator or freezer.

Here's one recipe to try. You can use powdered sweetener of your choice too, just sweeten it to your taste. The ascorbic acid powder is Vitamin C. If you can't find it as a powder, use 750 mg of vitamin C tablets. Crush them to a fine powder. They help keep the color brighter.

Freezer Strawberry Jam

1 ½ tsp unflavored gelatin	1 ½ Tbsp cold water
3 C crushed strawberries	1 ½ Tbsp liquid sweetener
1/4 tsp ascorbic acid powder	red food coloring if desired

Mix gelatin into cold water to soften. Combine fruit and sweetener in saucepan and heat to boiling, stirring continuously. Remove from heat, stir in gelatin. Return to heat and boil 1 minute. Remove from heat again, stir in ascorbic acid and coloring. Pour into 1 - 4 clean containers and put lids on. Store in refrigerator or freezer. Makes 1 pint. Each tablespoon has 5 calories.

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