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Homemakers' chat

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U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

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QUESTION BOX:

- Coffee jars for canning?
- Why preheat before packing?
- Why not fill jars?
- Rack necessary?
- Why not use canning powders?

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ANSWERS FROM:

Canning specialists of the U.S. Department of Agriculture

--ooOoo--

Canning questions have the floor today---and the canning specialists of the U. S. Department of Agriculture are ready with the answers. If you have still other canning problems, write to the Department for information before you run the chance of making mistakes and losing some of those good vegetables from your Victory Garden. Or get in touch with your State Extension Service.

The first question is about commercial jars--the kind you buy coffee or mayonnaise or peanut butter in, sometimes called "63's." This homemaker says: "I have a number of coffee jars with screw-on tops. Could I use them for canning?"

Yes. The canning specialists say that these jars are satisfactory to use if you buy new flat metal lids, edged with sealing compound, to fit them. You use the old screw-on lid as a screw band. Pry out the old paper lining, or boil and scrape out any old sealing compound in the cap. Punch one or two small holes in the cap from the inside, and they are ready to use as screw bands.

When you can with these jars, fill the jar with hot food, and put the lid on so that the sealing compound is next to the glass. Screw the metal cap on firmly, but not so hard that you cut through the compound. When screwed on firmly, this lid has enough "give" to let air escape during canning. After canning leave the cap "as is." This lid is a self-sealer, so don't tighten it any further, or you may break the seal.

When the jar has cooled off---or the next day---take off the screw cap or band,

if you can do so without forcing it. To loosen the cap if it sticks, cover it for a minute or two with a hot, damp cloth. If it doesn't come off then, leave it on.

The next question is one that comes up many times every canning season. "Why do canning directions say to preheat or precook before packing food in jars? Is this better than a cold pack?"

Except for red raspberries and other soft berries, which only need processing a very short time, and which lose their shape if handled too much from one container to another, canning specialists recommend precooking fruits, tomatoes and all vegetables, for several reasons. The quick heating shrinks the food, so that more of it will go into the jars. And packing it hot shortens the processing time in the canner---and so helps save vitamins. Have the hot liquid ready to combine with the hot solid food when you pack the jars. And have the jars hot by heating in a pan of water brought gradually to boiling so they will not crack when you put in the hot food. It usually takes three-fourths of a cup to one cup of liquid to fill in around solid food in a quart jar and cover it. For fruits this liquid is juice or sirup; for tomatoes, hot tomato juice; for other vegetables, generally cooking liquid; or sometimes boiling water. So much for packing hot. Here's a question on filling the jars.

"Why are we always told to leave unfilled space in the top of a jar when canning?"

You leave space in the top of the jar for food to expand. This is called head space. As you pack the food into the jar, work out any air bubbles with a knife blade. Leave half an inch head space when you cover fruits, tomatoes, and pickled vegetables with liquid, and then can them in a hot water bath. Leave one inch head space when you cover starchy peas, beans, or corn with liquid, half an inch head space for other vegetables. Can all non-acid vegetables in a steam pressure canner.

In the next letter a homemaker asks whether a rack is necessary. She says:

"I have no rack for my water-bath canner. Is it safe to put jars on a towel in the bottom of the canner?"

No. Boiling water must circulate under the jars. Try making a rack of wooden laths or thin wooden boards. Don't use pine, however.

And here's another question which the canning specialists answer with an emphatic NO. "Couldn't I just use some kind of preservative powders and avoid all the work of boiling my jars of fruit and tomatoes?"

BUT NO! the canning specialists say, and in this they are backed up by the Federal Food and Drug Administration, which has taken legal action to prevent interstate distribution of one canning compound.

Let's go over the reasons why you shouldn't attempt to use canning compounds of any sort--why the "work" of boiling your acid foods in a water bath, and processing those that aren't acid in a steam pressure canner---is the only safe way to can. First, trade names for such powders often hide substances that are likely to be dangerous if used in canned foods.---Formaldehyde, salicylic acid, and boric acid---are some of these chemicals. Some of these may not be harmful in one small dose, but if the family eats home-canned food all next winter, they would get repeated "doses" of the chemical and this could have an injurious effect.

Second: Some canning powders do not prevent the treacherous botulinus bacterium from growing in canned food; most of them do not preserve the food from other spoilage organisms. Third, some of the compounds affect food value--especially destroying vitamin B-one. Fourth, another unfortunate result of pinning one's faith in canning powders is that home canners who depend on them often get careless about cleaning their equipment thoroughly. They hope the powders will make up for poor fruits and vegetables and lazy canning methods. A homemaker might use a canning powder that is relatively harmless in itself and still have her food ruined by spoilage organisms.

The rule for safe canning is to apply heat properly according to rules based on scientific canning research. Process fruits and tomatoes in a boiling water bath. Use a steam pressure canner to process all other vegetables, meats and poultry. And don't use canning powders.

