

Economics of Home Food Preservation, or Is Do-It-Yourself Back to Stay?

by Ruth N. Klippstein

Back-to-basics may turn out to be the theme song of the 1970's as some of the simple activities of the past are rediscovered and practiced. Do-it-yourself is in. Nowhere is the trend more apparent than in the area of home production and preservation of the family food supply. Ten years ago no one would have dreamed the lowly canning jar lid would be the subject of Federal hearings. No one would have believed that an estimated one in four U.S. families would be raising and preserving a portion of their food supply.

What motivates people to return to home food production and preservation? Are their expectations realistic? How extensive is their gardening? Will they continue a second year? Do they preserve any of their crop? These were among the questions posed by Stuhlmiller, How and Stone of Cornell University in 1975 to a group of gardeners in five upstate New York counties.

When asked whether they gardened to save money, to have better quality food or just for a hobby or recreation, three-fourths of the 2,800 who replied hoped to save money, 54 percent considered gardening a hobby, while only 46 percent gardened for fresher food. Most said they preserved at least some of the food they grew.

If this study is indicative of the country as a whole, it is important to realistically assess whether home food production and preservation can save substantial amounts of money and whether the satisfaction gained warrants the cost of time and energy expended.

The actual costs of home food preservation, for example, should be considered. The cost of home grown food should be compared to the cost of similar food purchased for preservation in quantities at local farms or markets. The quality of the home preserved items should be realistically analyzed against readily available commercially preserved food.

There is no such thing as free food. Someone, somewhere, has to pay for it in time, energy, know-how, and at least some outlay of dollars. Home production in amounts needed for food preservation requires a longtime commitment of family resources. Beginners should realize that realistic goals and reasonable skills in the field and kitchen are essential to make home preservation pay off.

There are no general statistics citing the average dollar-cost needed to grow a given amount of fresh produce in a home garden. Conditions between individual gardens, weather, soil type, skill of operator, and geographic areas vary too much for valid comparisons.

Extension specialists at Michigan State University, however, have computed the actual cost of raising tomatoes under home gardening conditions in East Lansing, Mich. They found it costs 12¢ to grow the amount of tomatoes (2½ to 3 pounds) needed for one quart, canned. A similar cost analysis for green beans showed that beans cost 30¢ for the amount needed for a quart. Only the expendable cost—seed, fertilizer, pesticides and water—was considered.

Adding the expense for needed tools, hoses and other capital items raised the cost another 33¢ a quart if the cost were absorbed in one season or 2¢ if amortized over a 20-year

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period. Unfortunately, the first-year gardener will find that the outlay for tools must be spent the first year so that return for the investment requires a commitment to gardening over many years.

Additional expenses are necessary if the bounty is to be preserved at home. Equipment for preserving tomatoes is minimal but equipment for canning vegetables and for freezing may be costly. Homemakers needing to invest in canners, a pressure canner, and home freezer will find that the dollar cost per package of food preserved during the first years of preservation may be higher than the cost of comparable food at the corner supermarket.

The costs of canning peaches, tomatoes and green beans in upstate New York were calculated by the author in 1975 and updated for price changes in 1976 using a number of different cost variables. She found that those who canned tomatoes could realize substantial savings, while the cost of purchasing peaches and preserving them at home approximated the cost of the commercially canned peach.

Determinations of the true cost of frozen food must consider the initial cost of the freezer plus the cost of operation and repair. Containers, plastic bags and boxes, or foil are additional costs.

Evelyn Johnson in her Outlook Talk of 1975 quoted staff at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and Cornell University as reporting a cost of 20¢ to 24¢

per pound of food frozen just for the convenience of freezing and storing food at home. Add to this the price of the food being frozen for the correct cost of home-preserved frozen food.

Freezing is probably the most satisfactory method of home food preservation, the most versatile and the easiest to do. But for all except the very best managers who use the freezer intensively, the home freezer is more a convenience than a money saver.

Time, Energy Costs

Raising a garden takes time over a significant number of months. As a hobby for table use, gardening can be a real pleasure. Skillful persons with the right tools and knowhow can handle a garden of the size needed for home food preservation with a few hours of work a week, once the plants are well established. Novices can expect to spend a significantly greater amount of time per week during the four or five month growing season in northern areas and even more in areas with longer growing seasons.

The author, an experienced gardener, kept records of the hours spent cultivating and harvesting a 20 by 40-foot garden, planted primarily for fresh consumption. Only three foods—tomatoes, green beans and cucumbers—were raised in amounts sufficient for a limited amount of home preservation. Over 40 person-hours were required. The actual grocery store value of the garden food consumed by the family of three was \$45. Food given as gifts and preserved raised the dollar value to \$75.

Gardening often helps stretch cash income, but the dollar return is low for hours of effort. And poor weather may cause crop failures and small

Needed equipment for home canning. Left, water bath canner, and right, pressure canner.

Cost of Home Food Preservation

Method	Time	Energy		Dollar cost from kitchen to table	Quality satisfaction
		Fuel	Human effort		
Freezing	Minimal low	High	Low	Very high	Very high
Canning	Moderate	Moderate	High	Moderate	Moderate to high
Drying	High	Moderate to high	Moderate	Moderate to high	High (specialty items) Low, if only method available
Pickling	High	Low	Moderate	* Depends upon type chosen	High
Storage (Unprocessed)	Low to moderate	Low	Moderate (Checking/culling)	Low	Moderate to high

* Some (such as quick dill pickles) are quick to make, take little effort, and use inexpensive ingredients. Others require prolonged brining over several days' time plus expensive sugar and other ingredients.

yields, regardless of effort. Food preservation also is time-consuming.

Satisfactions. Why garden or preserve food at home? Most gardeners will cite a number of reasons:

—The best of good fresh food with no unknown additives or ingredients

—Healthy exercise

—Family pleasure working together toward a goal

—The joy of giving

—The challenge of growing a seed into edible food

—Prestige

There is no one right answer to the question, "Does it pay to raise and preserve my own food?" It depends upon your personal goals. You may not save a significant number of dollars. You will work hard. And you probably will experience one of the most exciting activities possible—raising at least some of the food your family uses.

"We grew it" are heady words which bring people back to home food production and preservation year after year.