

Freezing spring and early summer vegetables

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Many spring and early summer vegetables harvested from the home garden are best preserved by freezing, not canning, according to University of Wisconsin-Extension food science specialist Barbara Ingham. “The delicate textures of young spinach and early peas are best preserved by freezing—with the added benefit that freezing saves time and preserves nutrients,” Ingham says.

Freezing also stops the growth of microorganisms such as bacteria, yeast and mold, while preserving nutrients.

To ensure high-quality products, Ingham advises carefully completing each step in the freezing process. “Spring vegetables contain proteins known as enzymes that can destroy nutrients and change the color, flavor, and texture of food during storage. A quick heat treatment known as blanching is all that is needed to preserve quality for extended frozen storage.”

Ingham says to follow these steps for high quality frozen spring and early summer vegetables.

- Blanch vegetables in boiling water or steam to set quality prior to freezing. Sugar snap peas or green peas require less than 2 minutes in boiling water to set quality prior to freezing; the same goes for spinach and other leafy greens.
- After blanching, cool heated vegetables rapidly to stop cooking and stabilize quality. Cool by plunging blanched vegetables into a bowl of ice water. Chill for the time equivalent to blanching, so if a blanch time of 2 minutes is used, plan to cool the vegetables in ice water for the same length of time. When cooling time is up, drain well to remove excess moisture and package for freezing.
- Vegetables can be solid packed or loose. For solid packed, put well drained vegetables into freezer containers or freezer bags. Freezer bags work well, allowing you to squeeze as much air as possible out of the bag prior to sealing. Be sure to label and date. A solid pack works best for leafy greens and sugar snap peas (pea pods). For frozen vegetables that can be easily poured out of a freezer bag, more like frozen vegetables from the grocery store, first freeze loose pieces in a single layer on a cookie tray, and then transfer frozen pieces to a freezer bag. A loose pack works well for green peas, corn, green bean pieces, etc.

To learn more about freezing and preserving food safely, contact Family Living Educator Jeanne Walsh, at UW-Extension Chippewa County (715)726-7950.