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Buy summer food for winter meals

NANCY GING - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Buying local foods during their peak season in the summer can be a great way to help even out your seasonal budget.

Think about it. Heating bills are high during the cold months when fresh foods are out of season. Similarly, wonderful local fruits and vegetables reach their peak during the warmest months of July and August.

By learning some simple food preservation techniques, you can stock up on high-quality winter food during the summer, when it's less expensive and you have extra food money to spend.



If you pick the food yourself at one of the u-pick farms in Whatcom County, you can usually save even more on the price.

The Whatcom Food & Farm Finder published by Sustainable Connections is a good way to find out which farms offer u-pick options. Pick one up at Terra Organica, the service desk at either Community Food Co-op location (see resources below), Village Books, or one of more than 200 other downtown locations. You can also get one at a farmers market or download it from the Sustainable Connections website, sustainableconnections.org/foodfarming/.

In previous articles I've talked about pickling, canning and freezing food. All of those methods require special equipment or at least space in the freezer.

Another simple preservation method is dehydration, and you'll be happy to know that no special equipment is needed. You can use ordinary cookie sheets and your oven to get excellent results.

As with all methods of food preservation, I recommend beginning by contacting the WSU Whatcom County Extension Office, 360-676-6736. Some foods require special handling, or are not appropriate for certain preservation techniques. The Extension Office can direct you to publications and websites to help you get started safely.

Lots of cherries and blueberries were available at the Farmers Market last weekend, so I decided to try drying some of them to use in recipes like muffins, pancakes, trail mix and oatmeal later this year.

Drying fruit tends to concentrate the flavors, making them little powerhouses of delightfully tasty treats. If the fruit you start with is sweet, the dried results will be sweet, too. If the fruit is tart, the results will be even more tart.

Dehydrating food begins with selecting the most perfect food you can find. When I got my cherries and blueberries home, I carefully sorted out any pieces that were bruised, not yet ripe, or had traces of mold or other kinds of damage. Because Farmers Market food has usually been picked within 24 hours before you buy it, I had almost zero food loss.

Starting with the blueberries, I found several methods for preparing them to dry. Some authors recommended blanching the berries first - boiling them for 1 to 2 minutes and then plunging them into ice water to stop the cooking. That splits the skins so the fruit can dry more easily.

Most authors, though, suggested simply rinsing the berries in water and tossing them gently with some fresh lemon juice to help preserve their color.

I opted for the lemon juice method (I like "easy"). I happen to have a small electric dehydrator I bought years ago, but blueberries can be dried easily in your oven on the "warming" setting - about 150 degrees. Spread the berries in a single layer on a baking sheet, and leave the oven door slightly ajar during drying so the moisture can escape. That also sets up a bit of a breeze as the warm air escapes, which speeds the drying process.

Cherries require a little more time to prepare because of their pits. I first pulled off the stems, then cut the cherries in half from stem end to blossom end and removed the pits. I laid the cherries on the drying sheet with the cut sides up. Some people recommend turning them a time or two during the drying process, but I didn't bother (again, I like easy).

After cooling, you can put the dried fruit into any airtight container. Resealable plastic bags, canning jars (preferably with dark glass to protect the fruit from sunlight) or tightly lidded storage containers all work well.

Dried fruit can be rehydrated before use by soaking it in water. However, in many recipes (such as oatmeal) you can add dried fruit as is before cooking the dish. If you want to substitute dried fruit for fresh fruit, you may need to add a little extra liquid to the recipe.

I'm sorry to report, however, that I unfortunately won't be able to eat my dried cherries and blueberries this winter. My grandson has already eaten every last bite of them. He took one sample of each and they quickly became his new favorite snack. I'll be buying more next weekend, of course, but most of the next batch is going to be stashed away in the pantry during his nap.

Producers are listed after each ingredient.

DRIED BLUEBERRIES

Fresh blueberries (HP Farms, Sumas)

If necessary, rinse the berries and spread on a towel to remove excess moisture. In a bowl, put clean berries and juice of one lemon. Mix lightly. Put in strainer to drain excess juice. Place in one layer on cookie sheet and dry for 8-10 hours at 140 to 150 degrees.

When dried blueberries have thoroughly cooled to room temperature, store in an airtight container.

DRIED CHERRIES

Fresh cherries (Nooksack 9, Everson)

Remove stems. Cut cherries in half and remove pits. Place in one layer, cut sides up, on a cookie sheet. Dry for 6-8 hours at 140 to 150 degrees.

When dried cherries have thoroughly cooled to room temperature, store in an airtight container.

LOCAL RETAIL FOOD RESOURCES

Appel Farms Cheese Shoppe, 6605 Northwest Road, Ferndale; open Mondays to Saturdays 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.;

Artisan Wine Gallery, 2072 Granger Way, Lummi Island; open for tastings Thursday and Fridays 4-7 p.m., Saturdays 1-5 p.m.;

Bellingham Farmers Market, Railroad at Chestnut, Saturdays 10 a.m.-3 p.m.; also at Fairhaven Village Green, 10th Street and Mill Avenue, Wednesdays noon to 5 p.m.;

Boxx Berry Farm Store and U-pick, 6211 Northwest Road, Ferndale; open Mondays to Saturdays 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and Sundays 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.;

Cloud Mountain Farm Nursery, 6906 Goodwin Road, Everson;

Community Food Co-op, 1220 N. Forest St., or 315 Westerly Road, Bellingham;

Everybody's Store, 5465 Potter Road, Deming;

Ferndale Public Market, Centennial Riverwalk in downtown Ferndale, Saturdays 10 a.m.-4 p.m.;

Field of Greens, corner of Kale and Everson roads, Everson; open Wednesdays-Fridays 2-6 p.m., Saturdays-Sundays noon-4 p.m.;

Grace Harbor Farms, 2347 Birch Bay-Lynden Road, Custer; open Mondays-Saturdays 9 a.m.-6 p.m.;

Half Acre Farm U-pick, 6211 Northwest Road, Ferndale (behind Boxx Berry Farm Store);

Lummi Island Farmers Market, across from the ferry dock, Saturdays 10 a.m.-1 p.m.;

Lynden Farmers Market, grounds of Third Christian Reformed Church in downtown Lynden, Saturdays, 10 a.m.-3 p.m.;

Red Barn Lavender Farm (eggs), 3106 Thornton Road, Ferndale; Saturday at Bellingham Farmers Market; or call during the week (360-393-7057);

Small's Gardens, 6451 Northwest Road, Ferndale; spring hours Tuesdays and Saturdays 9 a.m.-6 p.m.;

The Islander, 2106 S. Nugent Road, Lummi Island;

Terra Organica, 1530 Cornwall Ave., Bellingham.

Reach Nancy Ging at 758-2529 or nancy@whatcomlocavore.com. For complete weekly locavore menus, recipes, and more resources, read her blog at whatcomlocavore.com

Read more: <http://www.bellinghamherald.com/2011/07/21/2110923/buy-summer-food-for-winter-meals.html#ixzz1TE8bHR4B>