

## **Food Drying: Planning ahead for summer**

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Now that the days are getting longer and the warm days of Spring appear to be just around the corner, the thoughts of many people are solidly focused on the joys of the upcoming gardening season. Along with considerations of what to plant, you may also want to begin planning what you are going to do with the fruits and vegetables you harvest.

This is the ideal time to consider drying various fruits and vegetables as an added alternative to the more traditional approaches of canning and freezing. Home food dehydrators have become increasingly popular in the past few years and the results can be really quite amazing. There are also many sources of information on the topic, both on-line and in books to help you get started.

The basic principle of food dehydration (or “drying”) is quite simple. Food spoilage depends largely on the presence of moisture to support microbial growth or aid in other degradative processes. If the water is removed from a food material, the risk of spoilage is greatly reduced. Moisture can be removed in a variety of ways, but forced-air drying is one of the most common and efficient methods, which is the case with most of today’s commercially available food dehydrators. They heat the incoming air to a desired temperature and blow it across the surface of the food by means of an internal fan.

Some dehydrators, like those in the Excalibur® line, have a set of square plastic mesh racks on which the prepared fresh material is placed. These racks slide into the drying chamber where a continuous stream of warm air removes the water. Other dehydrators, like those by Nesco / American Harvest®, use stackable trays to hold the produce being dried. Once again, a fan circulates heated air throughout the unit. These are the two most popular brands of dryers available and both do an excellent job. Before deciding which type to purchase, you should visit each company’s website to determine which best suits your needs. Don’t forget about your future needs as well as your initial needs.

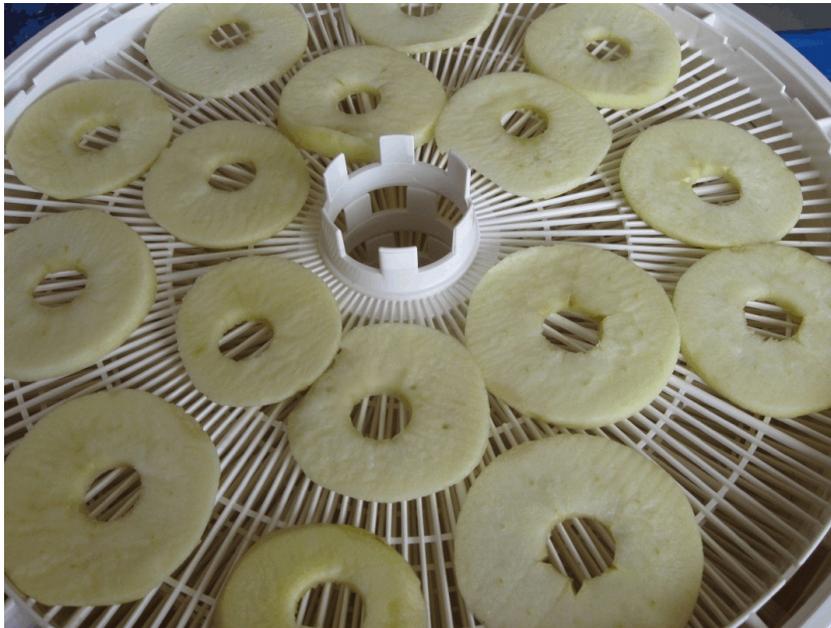
If you do plan to purchase a home food dehydrator, now is an excellent time to do so. You can familiarize yourself with the dehydration process and gain experience before you begin to harvest your garden crops. Reading the instructions that come with your dehydrator is the most important step to getting started. Then a few practice runs are in order. Personally, I would recommend starting with something fairly straight-forward like dried apple rings.

Apples are available at a reasonable price in most grocery stores throughout the year. Select high quality apples that are reasonably sweet. “Macs” are ideal for this purpose.

As the water is removed, the sweetness of the apples intensifies, which makes them an appealing snack. Wash the apples, peel them (if desired), and core them. Then, slice the apples crosswise into rings about a quarter of an inch (5 mm) thick. You may want to dip the slices in lemon juice or a commercially available preparation to prevent them from browning during the drying process (this is entirely optional). Allow the excess lemon juice to drain from the surface of the rings and place them on the plastic mesh dryer racks. Be careful not to have them overlapping as this will slow the drying process. With the dryer set at 130°F (55°C), it should take about 6 to 8 hours for the apple rings to dry. It's a good idea to check the progress of your drying periodically and flip the apple rings about half-way through the process. Once suitably dried, the apple rings will feel dry and leathery, and be spongy and firm. Remove the apple rings from the dehydrator and allow them to cool before placing them in an air-tight container for storage.

One common mistake is not fully drying the apples. If too much moisture is left in the apples, they will spoil. There are many reference sources available on the subject of home food drying.

It is a good idea to keep accurate records of your drying activities. Label all containers so that you can refer back to the conditions for a particular batch of dried foods. Once you feel comfortable with drying apples, you can move on to other things and enjoy this convenient way to process some of your own fruits and vegetables.



Apple rings are an excellent way to get started in home food drying