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Principles of Pickling

It's summer time and that means it's the time to pickle. Pickling is still a popular way to preserve the garden's bounty. Many pickles and relishes take only a short time to prepare. By using vinegar it eliminates the need to use longer methods that rely on lactic acid formed in fermentation or long-term brining and curing. With vinegar, pickles can be made in a day or two with favorable results. Prized pickles are not the result of good luck. They require good ingredients and reliable methods.

Use the right equipment:

- When making pickles, utensils should be stainless steel, enamelware, glass or food grade plastic. Copper may turn pickles green and iron may turn pickles black. The vinegar and salt react with galvanized metal and produce a toxic substance.
- Check your jars carefully and discard any that have chips or cracks.
- Use a candy or meat thermometer to determine the simmering water bath temperature (170 –190 F).
- A water bath canner or deep kettle is needed if the recipe calls for water bath processing. The jars should be covered with an inch of water. You will need a rack for the bottom of the kettle. Folded tea towels can be used if you don't have a rack.

Use the right ingredients:

- Choose fruits and vegetables that are firm, fresh, and free from bruises or blemishes. Preserve as soon after picking as possible. Fruit should be slightly underripe to hold its shape.
- Use small or medium cucumbers. If large cucumbers are used, slice or cut into chunks. Salad cucumbers from the supermarket are coated with wax and must be sliced. Pickling cucumbers are smaller and lighter than salad cucumbers and they have a more penetrable skin.
- Any food grade salt may be used for pickling. **DO NOT USE** salt substitute in fermented pickles.

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- Use fresh spices for best flavor.
- Use granulated cane or beet sugar. Brown sugar may be used but it creates a darker product and has a stronger flavor. Honey may be substituted for the sugar, however it is sweeter than regular sugar so use one-quarter less.
- It is not necessary to use alum if the vegetables are fresh and good methods are used. When Alum is desired for extra crispness, use no more than 1/8 of a teaspoon per quart of liquid plus pickles. Too much may cause digestive upset.
- Lime is sometimes used as a presoak for extra crispness. Lime may be purchased from a building supply or farm and garden supply store. Non-hydrated lime is calcium oxide. Hydrated or slaked lime is calcium hydroxide. Either hydrated or non-hydrated lime can be used. Like alum, lime is not necessary if fresh vegetables and good methods are used. Use ¼ to ½ cup lime in a gallon of water. Soak cucumbers overnight. Rinse several times with clear water.
- Vinegar. Use a good, clear standard vinegar, free from sediment, with 4 to 6 percent acetic acid (40 to 60 grain strength). Distilled white vinegar helps to keep the original color in foods. Cider, malt or wine vinegar may slightly darken the food, but may be preferred for their flavor and aroma in some recipes. Avoid long boiling of vinegar solution to prevent loss of acetic acid, which is important in the keeping qualities and safety of pickles.

The next step is to pick your favorite recipes and get started.

Source: Safe Methods for Preparing Pickles, Relishes and Chutneys, University of California Cooperative

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