Gardens will soon be overflowing with shiny, red tomatoes, bright green peppers and string beans. Produce stands will be piled high with fresh produce, or you may decide to pick your own fruits and/or vegetables at local farms.

Whatever produce you choose, canning can be a safe and economical way to preserve food at home. Canning favorite and special products to be enjoyed by family and friends is a fulfilling experience and a source of pride for many people.

The advantages of home canning are lost when you start with poor quality fresh foods; when jars fail to seal properly; when food spoils; and when flavors, texture, color and nutrients deteriorate during prolonged storage.

The canning process involves placing food in jars and heating to a temperature that destroys microorganisms that are a health hazard or cause food to spoil. It also causes enzymes that can cause the food to spoil to become inactive. Air is driven from the jar during heating, and as it cools, a vacuum seal prevents air from getting back into the product, bringing with it microorganisms to recontaminate the food.

Safe canning methods

There are two safe ways of canning, depending on the type of food being canned. These are the boiling water bath method and the pressure canner method.

The boiling water bath method is safe for fruits, low acid tomatoes and pickles, as well as jam, jellies and other preserves. In this method, jars of food are heated completely covered with boiling water (212 degrees).

Pressure canning is the only safe method of canning vegetables, meats, poultry and seafood. Jars of food are placed in 2 to 3 inches of water in a pressure canner which is heated to a temperature of at least 240 degrees. This temperature can only be reached in a pressure canner.

A pressure canner is a specifically made heavy pot that has a lid that can be closed tightly to prevent steam from escaping. The lid is fitted with a vent, a dial or weighted pressure gauge and a safety fuse. The pressure canner also has a rack. Because each type of canner is different, be sure to read the directions for operating your canner.

In preparation for this canning season, we recommend you assemble and evaluate all canning equipment. To make sure that your pressure canner is working properly, we also recommend you have your dial gauge checked. We will be offering testing for dial gauge pressure canners at the following locations:
* May 24: 9:30 - 11:30 and 1:30 - 4:00; Bladen Cooperative Extension Center

June 20: 2:00 - 4:00; Clarkton Public Library

If you have questions, please call Sandra Kelly at 862-4591.