

# Food Preservation: The Next Frontier

by Lisa Duchene

Forging new ground:  
Showing customers how to  
save their harvests



WHEN SANDI HILLERMANN McDonald of Hillermann Nursery & Florist near St. Louis suspected her customers would be hungry for basic how-to information on vegetable gardening and preserving their harvest, she was right.

She just didn't realize how hungry.

The IGC hoped 35 to 40 people would turn out for six workshops early last spring on basic topics such as soil composition, square-foot gardening and canning. Instead, twice that, about 80 people, showed up for each workshop, determined to save money and eat better-tasting, healthier food by growing their own vegetables and preserving their harvest year-round. The group represented Baby Boomers and a lot of Gen X / Gen Y gardeners, McDonald says.

Across the country, demand for vegetable gardening, edible land-

scaping - and now preservation of home harvests - is skyrocketing. At Jarden Home Brands, manufacturer of Ball jars and canning supplies, overall sales were up 28 percent in 2009 from the previous year. Gaining control over food safety, preservatives and additives, as well as economizing and a desire for fresh flavor, are all pegged as drivers of the trend.

Subscriptions to *Organic Gardening* magazine have jumped 28 percent since 2007, and the magazine has expanded its coverage of food and cooking to reflect interest in the back-to-basics trend of consumers growing and preserving their own food. "Interest in both organics and gardening is growing at staggering rates," *Organic Gardening's* Senior Vice President and Publisher Mary Murcko says.

The canning crowd now includes

beginners and younger generations. A Jarden company survey of people interested in home canning found that half of respondents were under 45 years old, and 26 percent were younger than 35.

Vegetable gardening is hip with foodies and do-it-yourselfers, demographics that overlap with the target customers for IGCs.

"You're seeing crossover," says Tim Hamilton, Marketing Director of Homestead Gardens in Davidsonville, MD. "The same people who are interested in gardening are pretty much into the cooking, too." And vice versa. In fact, Homestead targets foodies by running television commercials in its trade area on the Food Network.

Thinking of your store as "just" a garden center can be restrictive, he says, because it implies that customers stop by to pick up their plants and

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leave. Hamilton suggests that IGCs do much more and would be better off coining a new term that encapsulates a lifestyle in which fresh food is paramount. What that term is, exactly, is not yet clear. It's a work in progress right now.

## Canning 101 for IGCs

Canning is a relatively simple process, offering benefits such as better-tasting, healthier food. Plus, it's a great family activity, an angle to especially promote to your Gen X customer base, many of whom have young children.

"If you can bake a cake, you can can. If you can operate a gas grill, you can can," says Mary Schroepfer, Nutrition and Health Education Specialist at the University of Missouri Extension.

But there are a few important safeguards to prevent potentially fatal illnesses like botulism. Consult and refer customers and staff to proper sources of information such as:

- The National Center for Home Food Preservation, ([www.uga.edu/nchfp/](http://www.uga.edu/nchfp/)), which contracts with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to offer the latest research-based canning and food preservation information via books, its website and online videos.
- Your local university cooperative extension, which is likely to have geographically specific information. Altitude, for example, is an important consideration.

- *Ball Blue Book of Preserving*

The USDA overhauled its canning instruction in 1989, so all of your customers' old family recipes should

be cross-referenced with the sources above to ensure they are safe. Schroepfer says, "We know a whole bunch more about bacteria than we did 30, 40 and 50 years ago."

The greatest risk is in improperly canning non-acidic foods, such as green beans. These foods must be canned in a pressure canner to prevent growth of the bacterium *Clostridium botulinum*, which causes botulism. The challenge with non-acidic foods is that the bacteria is odorless, invisible and can grow without oxygen in a sealed jar.

Acidic foods, such as pickles, fruit, jelly or tomatoes, can be done in a water bath canner. This process requires less equipment (a stock pot, rack, jars, lids, seals and tongs) and presents less risk (spoilage is noticeable, thanks to an odor or a moldy/fuzzy appearance). For these reasons, water bath canning acidic foods is a great place for beginners to start. Freezing and drying foods are other options but also require special attention.

Schroepfer advises garden centers steer customers to the right vegetable varieties for preserving and encourage them to preserve only the freshest foods; ideally, only

### Its own space

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two hours lapse between garden-picked and the jar.

## Homestead's Fest

As part of a one-day Tomato Festival last September, Homestead held a canning demonstration attended by 35 to 40 people. "[They] were absolutely fascinated," says Hamilton. "I doubt people in their 20s and 30s even saw their grandparents doing this. It's not so commonplace to find people who still can. People are interested in learning, and we sold quite a bit of product, so we'll do it again this year."

The Tomato Festival celebrated homegrown favorites and garden-based culinary selections, including salsas, tomato sauce and roasting and



smoking tomatoes. Homestead set up red-and-white tents, tables with red-and-white-checked tablecloths and giant barbecue cooking stations in a field on its property. Two bands played throughout the day, alongside workshops, seminars and a salsa contest with 50 entries. Four hundred people attended, paying a \$25 entry fee. The canning supplies Homestead ordered, including Ball jars, pots, racks, tongs and books, sold well. This year, the IGC is changing only the date, hoping to catch families between summer and Labor Day travel.

After seeing 20 percent increases in vegetable seedlings and herb plants in each of the last three years, Hamilton expects the trend to stay strong. Homestead will continue merchandising canning supplies this season, and is making the most out of social networking. Rita Calvert, known as "The Local Cook," writes about food and cooking regularly in Homestead's blog, and the garden center is posting the information on Facebook and Twitter, and hoping to do online video demonstrations too.

### Hillermann's Dedication

The broad interest in growing vegetables, edible landscaping and now preserving home harvests for year-round enjoyment is the reason Hillermann's added its canning department last year and has plans to expand it this year. "We could see the younger generation going from cooing to burrowing," says McDonald. "They really want to know what their children are eating. They want things fresh."



### Celebrating the tie-in

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The food preservation/canning section is part of Hillermann's "Kitchen Gardening" department, where on weekends throughout the season peppers, zucchini and onions are grilled to entice.

The department sells apple peelers; fruit pickers, baskets on the end of a long pole; fruit pitters; apple slicers; vegetable washers and slicers; skewers for grilling; and canning supplies, including jars, canners, racks, tongs and the *Ball Blue Book of Preserving*.

Last year, the section also included two 4'x8' raised display beds, set up according to Mel Bartholomew's square-foot gardening books. This year, McDonald is expanding that to four display beds of the same size, each with different themes: a salad garden, a tomato/basil garden, espaliered fruit trees and herbs.

Also this year, Hillermann's has planned a "Salsa Saturday" for May 1, just ahead of Cinco de Mayo and Mother's Day, during which the garden center will demonstrate how to build salsa gardens of tomatoes, peppers, cilantro and marigolds (for insect-resistance) - both in-ground and in containers. It plans to serve salsa and chips, grill vegetables and offer information on making and preserving homegrown, homemade

salsa. Home preservation tutoring will continue through the year, says McDonald. And Hillermann's is expanding its edible containers, featuring both ready-made con-

tainers with pretty plants, such as beets and Swiss chard, and how-to information for DIYers.

Last year, McDonald asked one of her Gen X employees to rewrite all of the store's informational handouts to be friendlier, more relevant and simpler for what she recognizes as the new generation of gardeners. One way Hillermann's is making this information personable is to link employees with customers - for example, "Patty's Picks" includes Patty's favorite tomato varieties and tomato recipes.

It is important for garden centers to keep in mind that Gen Xers are likely not growing their grandmothers' garden. They simply don't have the space. Scale everything down for small spaces. Make it hip, urban, sustainable-minded - and local.

"We are trying to do some very easy, simple, educational steps so customers don't get too overwhelmed and can continue the process of gardening," says McDonald. The key is to remove the intimidation factor wherever possible and make the information fun and personal. "Don't go throwing around horticultural terms and botanical names," she says. "It has to be simple." ■

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