

Thank you for signing up for the **Seed to Pantry** monthly newsletter, where you will receive recipes and tips about food preservation, backyard gardening, and cooking with real food.

I hope you enjoy this excerpt from my book:

The Confident Canner – Answers to Your Canning Questions, ©2014.

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If you want even more answers to canning questions, find the full print or Kindle versions at Amazon.com.

Or you can also find a downloadable PDF version at Etsy.com.

Jams and Jellies

Jams, jellies, and other soft spreads like fruit butters, preserves, and marmalades can be a sweet introduction to home canning. After all, there's nothing quite like opening a jar of fragrant apricot or blackberry jam in the dead of winter, to remind us that summer will indeed come once again. Soft spreads also offer enough variety to assure that everyone on your gift list will find something they like; whether apple-cinnamon butter, tangy orange marmalade, or rich raspberry jam.

Seed to Pantry

Do I have to add powdered or liquid pectin to homemade jam?

There are many jam recipes that do not call for added pectin, although adding pectin does make the jam making process shorter. Jam made with added pectin requires more sugar than long-cooking jams. Also, some people are sensitive to gums and pectin, and pectin-added jams cause stomach upsets. Jellies, on the other hand, almost always require added pectin unless you are making a naturally high pectin jelly like apple or grape.

What is pectin?

Pectin is the naturally occurring gum that allows a jam or jelly to set up (in conjunction with acid). Some fruits are naturally high in pectin like apples, Concord grape and citrus fruits. Others have almost no natural pectin like peaches and most berries.

What is a fruit conserve?

Fruit conserves are similar to jams, but usually include nuts and sometimes raisins. Fruit conserves can be eaten as jams spread on bread, or as a sweet condiment, much like many relishes.

Can I substitute liquid pectin for powdered pectin when making jam?

No. Recipes written for liquid pectin usually do not work well with powdered pectin and vice versa.

Is it ok to use sugar substitutes like Splenda® or Equal® when making jam?

If you are using a sugar substitute you must use a low-sugar pectin product designed specifically for sugar substitutes. Long cooking jams also do not work well with sugar substitutes, as the substitute becomes bitter with the cooking time. Many people have better luck making freezer jam if they want to use a sugar substitute.

I love jelly, but juicing fruit takes too long. Is it ok to use canned juice from the grocery store?

Purchased juice can be used if it is unpasteurized juice. Most commercially prepared juice has been processed and the pectin removed, therefore jelly made with it won't set.

Why are there crystals in my grape jelly?

Sometimes crystals form in grape jelly from a naturally occurring acid found in grapes. Growing conditions affect the amount of this acid, so you may not be able to completely eliminate them. Reduce the chance by straining the grape juice and letting it sit in the refrigerator for up to 5 days before making jelly.

What is clear jel?

Instant Clear Jel is a form of corn starch that does not need to be heated in order to set. It can be used to make low-sugar jams, but should be combined with the sugar first to avoid lumpy jam.

What is Pamona's Universal Pectin®?

Unlike Clear Jel, Pamona's Universal Pectin® is a special kind of pectin product that allows you to make jams and jellies with low or no sugar. The pectin uses a calcium phosphate powder to help set up, thus allowing for less sugar.

Help! My homemade jam is moldy on the top. Can I just scrape the mold off and eat the rest of the jam?

Moldy food should be thrown out. Although it may look like the mold is just on the top, that is seldom true. Microscopic mold, which will still make people sick, probably has penetrated well into the jar.

Is there a way make jelly without added pectin?

Only a few fruits contain enough natural pectin and acid to make a good jelly without added pectin. Those most likely to have a good result are apples, crabapples, grapes, some plums and tart cherries.

My long cooking jams never seem to set up. Why?

Long cooking jams can be difficult to get just right. Think of long cooking jams as a science experiment. Outside forces can affect the success or failure of the jam. For example, if you are trying to cook a batch of long cooking jam on a steamy, humid day the batch will probably never set up. Why? Because the air is so full of water that the sugar/fruit combination cannot keep up with it.

Another reason could be impatience. Long cooking jams can take a nearly an hour to reach the jelling point. That is a long time to stir and tend to a pot of bubbling fruit. To assure success, make sure that you have the correct amount of fruit, sugar and acid by following an approved recipe, and cook it to the gelling point.

My cooking jam is making a mess! How do I keep it from boiling over?

This is my all-time favorite tip. Before you start cooking the fruit/sugar mixture, rub butter or margarine around the top of the saucepot. The fat keeps the jam from boiling over.

Is there any way to decrease the amount of foam that forms on the cooking jam?

Stirring constantly will keep the foam down. But that can be a lot of stirring! Adding a teaspoon or so of butter to the cooking jam will also decrease the foam. Once you have removed the jam from the heat, but before adding it to the canning jars, you can stir vigorously and usually stir the foam down. If all else fail, skim the foam off the top before putting the jam in the jars.

My Mom always used paraffin wax to top her jam, and didn't process jam in a water bath. Can't I just follow her directions?

I remember my mother making jam the same way, but the paraffin wax approach is no longer considered safe. Processing jam in a water bath adds an extra measure of safety and helps the jam stay good for a longer period of time. (I also remember opening a new jar of jam, removing the paraffin only to find a layer of mold-yuck!) Using the water bath method is less messy than playing around with potentially flammable paraffin too.

Even though I use butter around the top of my saucepot, the cooking jam still spits and gets all over the kitchen. Is there any way to prevent that from happening?

I have a habit of falling into this trap too because my favorite saucepot is really too small for a regular batch of jam. Using a larger saucepot/Dutch oven will reduce and even eliminate the “sticky kitchen syndrome”.

I love to make jam, but most recipes just call for too much sugar. Can I reduce the sugar amount?

Yes and no. Long cooking, no-pectin-added recipes must be made with the prescribed amount of sugar. Sugar helps the jam set up, and also acts as a preservative in these recipes. Reducing the sugar amount would result in either a runny jam and/or a jam that cannot be safely stored at room temperature.

Some jams that use added pectin can be made with less sugar. Be sure to purchase the “low-sugar” specific pectin and follow the insert directions. Freezer jams can also be made with less sugar as they are preserved in the freezer.

Can I use honey or maple syrup in jam?

You can replace up to half of the sugar with an equal amount of honey or maple syrup, and cook as you would normally. Honey and maple syrup will change the flavor of your jam though, as they both have quite a bit of flavor on their own. I personally like to use maple syrup with apple spreads or anything cranberry. Honey adds a mellowness to peach that I just love.

This summer is just too hot to make jam! Can I freeze the fresh fruit and then make it into jam this fall?

Absolutely. This is a great idea, especially if you live in one of this summer's "hot zones." Peaches, all berries, and cherries freeze especially well. When you are ready to turn them into jam just measure out the correct amount (don't even have to thaw) and proceed with the recipe.

Why do some jam recipes call for the addition of lemon juice and some do not?

Lemon juice is added to some fruits to increase the acid content. This is especially important if you are making long cooking jams that do not call for added pectin. A high acid level helps the jam set, or gel, thus the addition of lemon juice! Fruit that naturally has a lower acid level (like peaches) usually needs lemon juice added. Lime juice may be added instead if you like. Lemon juice is also sometimes added to help keep the fruit from turning brown.

I want to make large amounts of jam to give as Christmas presents, but I don't want to spend all day cooking. Can't I just double or triple the jam recipe?

Sorry, the answer is no. Jams work best when made in small batches. Large batches of jam made at home (without commercial equipment designed for large batches) often result in burned, over-cooked jam. Stick to small batches for perfect jams and other soft spreads.

How can I tell when a long cooking jam or preserve is set? I always seem to overcook them.

This is a common problem, especially if you are new to long cooking no-pectin-added jams. There are a couple of ways to check.

My favorite is to drop some of the cooking jam onto a glass plate and put it in the fridge for a minute. If the jam sets up to the level you like (there is no such thing as the “right” level, only the level you prefer) remove the cooking jam from the heat and ladle it into the jars.

Another way is to drop some of the cooking jam onto a glass plate that is already cold. Draw a spoon through the jam. If the line stays separated, the jam is done.

You can also check by temperature. Jam is usually set when the temperature reaches 8-9 degrees above the temperature of boiling water. Water usually boils at 212 degrees, but not always. Several things can affect the temperature including altitude and barometric pressure. So, if you choose to use this method, measure to see what today’s boiling water temperature first. Otherwise you may end up with burnt jam from cooking too long.

My batch of jam didn't set. Is there any way to salvage it?

There are a variety of reasons why long cooking jams and preserves might not set. Since we don't add pectin, the fruit acidity is very important. Some fruits are just not acid enough to ever set without pectin added (melons for example). But sometimes the fruit is just too ripe so the acid level is a little low. Sometimes the jam wasn't cooked long enough to set. Cooking time fluctuates with the weather, so even if your raspberry jam last week cooked in 30 minutes, this week it may take 40 minutes or even 20 minutes. So, here's what to do:

- Spoon all the undercooked jam into a large saucepot.
- Add about 1 tsp lemon juice for each cup of jam.
- Bring to a boil and cook until jam sets.
- Remove from heat and pour into clean jars.
- Seal and process in a water bath canner for 10 – 15 minutes.

Oh no! My homemade jam is thick and almost like candy! How can I fix it?

It's is harder to salvage overcooked jam. If the jam tastes scorched, it's best just to throw it away and try again. If the jam isn't scorched but is too thick to use as jam, slowly heat it in the microwave with a little added water and use it as syrup. I also have used overcooked jam in place of honey in homemade BBQ sauce, stir-fry sauce, or in the center of muffins. You could also melt overcooked jam in the microwave and brush it over pound cake or bar cookies.

Are you anxious to start making delicious Jams and Jellies? Find my favorite recipes on at SeedtoPantry.com, or in my book, **Creative Jams and Preserves** at Amazon or Etsy. Watch for your monthly newsletter for new tips and recipes.