Step By Step

By Earlene Gleisner, RN, Special for ATW

Learn to Preserve Food

Because of growing awareness that organic foods are more beneficial to our health, many of us are looking to our gardens as a way to provide food for ourselves and families. What do you do, though, when you get a bumper crop of pears or tomatoes, or any other fruit or vegetable? April Cunningham, Food Systems Coordinator on the North Coast Opportunities (NCO) Community Action Team, gave us the three top suggestions for food preservation during her ATW Speaker Series presentation April 6 at the Willits Senior Center. NCO is working in many ways to bring the local farmer and the local 'eater' together. April's program is working both to utilize local food sources and to teach about preparing and preserving Mendocino County's bounty.

April showed us how easy it is to grow potatoes and other veggies in containers so that a family doesn't have to have a huge back yard to provide pesticide-free food for themselves. She shared seeds and recipes to encourage us to grow and use what we grew. Part of her talk included the benefits and methods of dehydration, freezing, and canning.

Dehydration is the oldest method and removes more bacteria, yeasts, and molds from the food. Calories and fiber contents remain the same as does the vitamins A and C and also the iron. This method can be done with the help of the sun, an oven, or with specialized equipment. Most important is to know when the food is dry and to store in glass containers. Freezing produce preserves the greatest amount of nutrients and makes bacteria dormant. It is important to seal bags, remove excess air, and label the bag as to content and date so packages can be rotated. Canning is the second oldest method of preserving food and requires special jars and lids as well as a water bather or pressure cooker. Food must be dust-free without mold or spots.

April provides detailed instruction for all these methods during her workshops as well as hands-on experience. Because participants pay only for the food which has been bought locally and at a negotiated price, they can take the preserved food home. All equipment and jars and bags are provided. If you are interested in learning more about this grant-funded program, call April at NCO 707-462-1954, and toll free, 800-606-5550.

Challenge for this month: Add one extra vegetable to your family's meal. Grate a carrot or a zucchini into the spaghetti sauce or meatloaf. Try peanut butter stuffed celery in your child's lunch or apple and orange slices for a snack. Seven half-cup servings of fruits and vegetables can better meet the nutritional needs of your body.

And, mark this event on your calendar! The Healthy Family Fair is May 31 at Recreation Grove Park in Willits. It's Fun! It's Free! Great food samples, games, diabetes screenings, Zumba, plus prizes and drawings from 11AM to 2PM.

The next Healthy Living workshop series, sponsored by Avenues to Wellness, will begin in Willits on June 9. For more information please call Judy Dunbar at 841-7657.

Avenues to Wellness was created especially for Inland Mendocino County by the Frank R. Howard Foundation. Visit [www.avenuestowellness.org](http://www.avenuestowellness.org/), or email atwforheatlh@gmail.com for more information.