

# Drying Your Garden's Harvest

Turn summer's crop into colorful condiments for year-round use

BY JANE SELOVER

Every gardener is thrilled by an abundant harvest, but having a green thumb has its downside, too. What do you do with the surplus of lush fruits, fresh vegetables, and fragrant herbs? You do some easy and creative preserving by drying. That's what I do in my job at the food and wine center of a California winery, where we have a five-acre organic garden. My summer days are spent finding ways to transform the great stuff from our garden into delicious, attractive, and interesting ingredients.

We dry everything from delicate day lilies, which we grind to a powder for decorating dessert plates, to big, fat Georgia Streak heirloom tomatoes, which we slice and dry until they're a leathery and incredibly sweet snack.

## LOSING WATER THROUGH DRYING MEANS GAINING FLAVOR AND SHELF LIFE

Drying produces an amazing transformation in fresh fruits and vegetables. Colors deepen, textures get chewy (and sometimes brittle), and flavors become intense and perfumy. The goal in drying is to remove enough water so that the environment becomes hostile to bacteria. Since many fruits are high in sugar and acid, partial dehydration will be enough to preserve them well. Lower-acid foods, like most vegetables, need complete dehydration.

## DRY OUTDOORS, INDOORS, OR IN YOUR OVEN

Your simplest choice of equipment is a nylon mesh screen set on a trestle in the full sun. The disadvantage of this method, however, is that your produce is subject to the whimsy of the weather, insects, and dust.

I do a lot of volume drying (my staff and I dried 200 pounds of just three varieties of tomatoes last summer), so I use a large dehydrator with spacious racks and a fan; it keeps the temperature constant and the air moving. You can use a small electric



*The shapes and colors of dried fruits can be as appealing as their flavors. Sliced persimmons display a star center, and figs show delicate shades of green.*



*Even size and lots of air are key to good drying. Here, fig wedges on a mesh drying rack have plenty of room for air circulation.*

Photos except where noted: Ellen Silverman; this page bottom left: Steve Hunter

dehydrator, designed for home use, usually built with about a half-dozen racks (see sources at right). Granted, if you're trying to keep up with a bumper crop of tomatoes you might fall behind, since drying does take time.

You can also use your oven, but only if you can regulate the heat to very low. Too much heat can cause the ingredient to dry hard on the outside but still be moist on the inside, which can easily lead to spoilage.

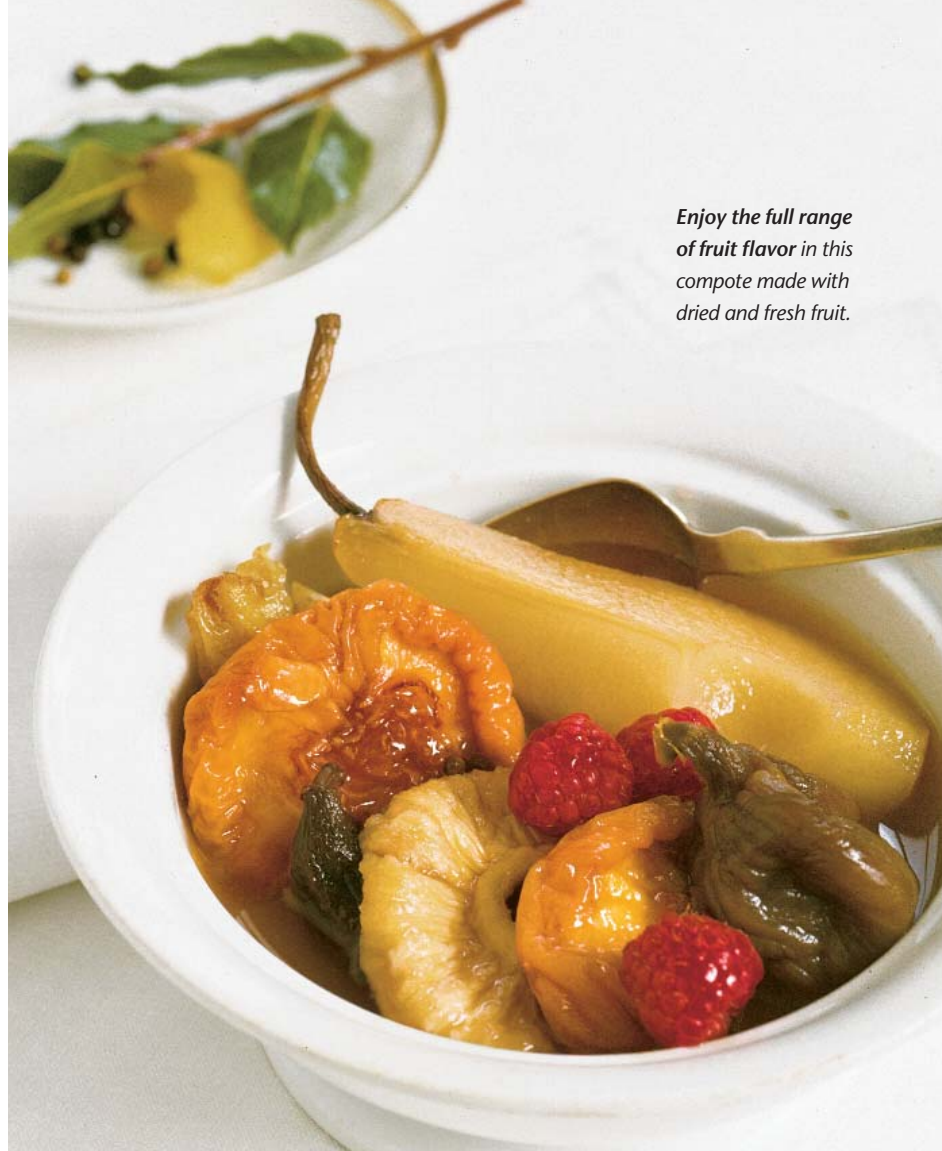
### THE METHOD IS READY, SET...WAIT

Start with only the most perfect, ripe ingredients; drying will intensify flavor, but not enough to make dull fruit delicious. First, rinse and dry the ingredient. In most cases, you'll want to halve small items or slice larger ones about 1/3 inch thick to speed drying and avoid mushy spots. Space the pieces generously on your drying rack and set it outside, in your dehydrator, or in the oven. Now wait.

The timing varies depending on the temperature and humidity outdoors, your choice of equipment, and the water content of the ingredients. Sliced tomatoes dried outdoors, for example, may take between three and five days in dry, partly sunny weather. In a home electric dehydrator, tomatoes will be leathery in eight to twelve hours. The best recipe is experimentation. Get a good reference book (see sources at right), read up, and then get to know the quirks of your specific conditions.

**Dry until chewy or crisp.** The degree of dryness you need is also a function of what you plan to do with the ingredients. For items to eat out of hand as a snack, you want the ingredient to be dry enough to prevent decay but moist enough to have a good chewy texture. If you plan to grind your item into powder or to rehydrate it to use in cooked dishes, you should dry it until crisp, which will ensure a longer shelf life.

**Preserve your preserves with careful storage.** How you're going to store your produce depends in part on how successful you were with drying it. The super-dry items can be stored at room temperature in a jar or a plastic bag, protected from light and dust. Partially dry items, like tomatoes or pears, should be stored in a plastic bag in the refrigerator or freezer just to be sure bacteria doesn't grow in the remaining moisture. Dried foods are so collapsed that they don't take up much room, and this way you won't have any unhappy surprises when you open the cupboard to use some of your precious stock of dried persimmons. Storing dried ingredients in oil is a good technique, too, because the oil acts as a preservative and the dried ingredient flavors the oil, but for safety's sake, keep these products refrigerated.



Enjoy the full range of fruit flavor in this compote made with dried and fresh fruit.

### Fresh & Dried Fruit Compote

This recipe is from John Ash, head of Fetzer's Food & Wine Center. Try to include figs, pears, and peaches in the dried fruit mix. If your dried fruit pieces are too big, cut them into manageable chunks. This compote is incredible served barely warm with a spoonful of yogurt cheese or mascarpone. *Yields about 1 quart.*

- 1 bottle dry white wine
- 2 Tbs. lemon juice
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1 cinnamon stick, 4 inches long
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 1/2 tsp. coriander seeds, lightly crushed
- 1 tsp. whole black peppercorns
- 1/2 lb. mixed dried fruit
- 2 Tbs. dry sherry
- 2 tsp. chopped candied ginger
- 1 lb. fresh firm, ripe pears or apples (or a mix), peeled, cored, and cut in thick wedges
- 2-inch strip pared lemon zest
- 3/4 cup fresh blueberries, raspberries, or cherries (or a mix)

In a nonaluminum pan, simmer the wine, lemon juice, sugar, cinnamon, bay leaf, coriander seeds, and peppercorns for 15 min., covered. Strain, return to the pan, and add the dried fruit, sherry, and ginger. Simmer, covered, another 10 min. Add the pears or apples and zest, simmer until just tender, 3 to 5 min., and then cool. Carefully stir in the berries. Store, refrigerated, for up to 10 days.

### SOURCES FOR DEHYDRATORS

**Chef's Catalog,**  
3215 Commercial Ave., Northbrook, IL 60026-1900; 800/338-3232

**Fante's,**  
1006 S. 9th St., Philadelphia, PA 19147; 800/878-5557

**Real Goods,**  
555 Leslie St., Ukiah, CA 95482-5507; 800/762-7325

### BOOKS

**Putting Food By,** by Janet Greene, et al., Viking Press, 1988.

**Fancy Pantry,** by Helen Witty, Workman Press, 1986.

**Stocking Up (3rd ed.),** by Carol Huppung, S&S Trade, 1990.

# Get creative with dried fruits, herbs, and vegetables

Once you're comfortable with the basic technique, you can make some wonderful condiments to use in your own cooking or to give as gifts.

## Tomatoes:

- ◆ Dry until still pliable and eat as a snack just by the slice.
- ◆ Pack dried slices in a clean glass jar, fill it with olive oil, and add a few sprigs of herbs and a few roasted garlic cloves; store in the refrigerator until needed. Use the oil-soaked dried tomatoes whole or cut-up on pastas, pizzas, and salads.
- ◆ Chop pliable or rehydrated tomatoes and add as a boost to bread doughs, vinaigrettes, sauces, or pilafs.

- ◆ Purée softened tomatoes with herbs such as basil and oregano and a little olive oil to make a spread.

## Chiles:

- ◆ String into a wreath or a graceful hanging *ristra*.
- ◆ Rehydrate to use in *moles* and other spicy dishes.
- ◆ Grind into custom chile powders
- ◆ Add to bottles of oil or vinegar to infuse.

## Mushrooms:

- ◆ Rehydrate to use, whole or sliced, in soups, stews, stir-fries, or pastas.
- ◆ Infuse in water or stock to make a flavorful broth.
- ◆ Rehydrate, mince, and blend with butter to top grilled fish or chicken.



Use the subtle beauty of dried and powdered flowers as a plate decoration. Red and pink rose petals and golden day lilies are pictured here.

## Edible flowers:

- ◆ Use whole roses as decoration for dessert plates, even salads.
- ◆ Grind into colorful powder to decorate plates (see above).
- ◆ Store with sugar in a sealed container to perfume the sugar for use in pastries.

## Herbs:

- ◆ Dry whole leaves to crumble into any type of recipe, especially bread doughs.
- ◆ Dry leaves to make custom blends and herb rubs.

## Fruit:

- ◆ Eat whole or sliced as a healthy snack.
- ◆ Use as an accent in a variety of dishes—blend with fresh cheese, toss in chicken salads, add to stuffings for poultry and meat, accent ice creams and other desserts.
- ◆ Poach in spiced syrup to make a compote (see recipe opposite).
- ◆ Purée, spread in a thin layer, and make fruit leathers, with either a single type of fruit or a combination.



Turn simple dried ingredients into delicious condiments, such as a custom-blended chile powder or a savory tomato-basil spread.

Jane Selover traded New York City for California's Mendocino County a few years before she began work at Fetzer Valley Oaks Food & Wine Center in 1990, first as a cook and, since 1993, as head of the drying and preserving program. ◆