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# DEHYDRATE FOODS IN YOUR KITCHEN OVEN

*By Kit Bernardi*

As long as people have camped under the stars, they've dehydrated foods to preserve them and make them easier to transport. Archeological evidence shows that ancient civilizations, including the Egyptians, Vikings, Romans and Native Americans, all sun-dried and fresh air-dried seeds, fruits, vegetables, grains, fish and meats. Today's campers can buy electric dehydrators and pre-packaged dried foods, but this can get pricey. Instead, you can dehydrate food in your own kitchen oven.

## SLICE AND DICE PREP

Most foods can be dehydrated. During the drying process, fresh foods shrink and get lighter in weight because moisture content reduces 85 to 95 percent (but nutrients remain).



For example, five pounds of fresh apples equate to approximately two cups of dried apples. The key to successful food dehydration is slice thickness uniformity, which ensures even drying, thus preventing spoilage in storage. According to Eartheasy.com's sustainable living blog, optimal slice thickness for fruits and vegetables is ¼ to ½ inch (use a mandoline slicer). Puncture or halve grapes, blueberries and peas so all moisture escapes.



Blanching vegetables beforehand preserves flavor. You can also dehydrate frozen vegetables. Apples are a good first-time dehydration project. Meats must be cooked before dehydration and cut into ½ inch cubes.

### OVEN READY, SET, DRY

All you need to dehydrate food is time and an oven, plus a baking pan, spatula and cooling rack. Depending upon the food, on average, oven dehydration takes eight to ten hours or more at approximately 140 degrees Fahrenheit. Check your oven's manufacturer's manual to ensure that it can be set this low. If not, put it on the "warm" setting, which may take more time to dry food. Some convection ovens have dehydration settings.

Arrange food on cooling racks fitted into the baking pans. Racks elevate food allowing heat to evenly circulate around it. Cover racks with parchment paper or a silicone mat to prevent food from sticking. Prop the oven door open approximately two inches (a wooden spoon works) for moisture to leave the oven. The Purposeful Pantry (which teaches food preservation and storage) recommends using an oven thermometer to monitor interior temperature consistency, and placing a fan alongside the oven to distribute escaping heat. Every hour, turn the pans and flip the food.



### TEST AND STORE

To make sure foods are dehydrated thoroughly, try slicing, pressing, and squeezing them to see if any moisture comes out. Let the food cool completely before loosely packing it in an air-tight container. After a few days, check for condensation. If present, oven-dry the food more. Store dehydrated foods in air-tight containers, such as canning jars and silicone bags. While dried foods can last years, it's best to eat them within four months to a year after drying.

### REHYDRATED FOODS

To rehydrate foods, it generally takes equal parts water to food to reconstitute. A particular food's density determines how long this takes. Soak dehydrated foods

before bringing to a boil. Then simmer for two to 10 minutes. An insulating pot accelerates this process. Turn off heat, cover the pot and let the food rest until it's fork tender. Using broth instead of water adds flavor, as do herbs, cheese, spices, and bullion. Instant mashed potatoes, bread crumbs, rice, pasta and quinoa can expand portion sizes.

Having dehydrated foods on hand really can expand your camp cooking options. Just like you test new gear at home before a camping trip, experiment with making meals with dehydrated foods before you head out on a trip. This will help you plan menus for delicious dining under the stars.