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Home Gardening & Canning vs. Buying Canned Goods

costs for green beans and tomatoes

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Canning Time

The words evoke vivid memories for many persons who dwell today in high-rise apartments, who "eat out" most of the time, who no longer have the time or inclination to preserve foods for their own consumption.

Not long ago, in countless Michigan households, the canning season began with rhubarb and berries and ended only when the last green tomatoes were plucked from the vines before the first killing frost. Through the intervening months, pots and cookers bubbled and steamed, filling bustling, hot kitchens with the appetizing aroma of fruits and vegetables to be canned before the day was over.

Homemakers took great pride in winning premiums for canned goods at county fairs. Family and friends admired pantry shelves stocked full from floor to ceiling with rows of glistening glass jars packed with the colorful bounty of orchard, field and garden.

The memories recall more than pride and accomplishment. Canning was hard work and a matter of family economics — food on the table to stretch through the long winter months until spring and summer yielded new harvests again.

Is it still so today?

Fewer families are canning now than two or three generations ago. But inflation, ecology and nostalgia have led many modern homemakers to re-con-

sider the question: Is home canning of fruits and vegetables cheaper today than buying canned goods?

Many good homemakers still think so. Some food scientists say "no", or "it depends."

It depends, in part, on the many uncertainties that influence the costs both of home canning and commercial processing. Weather conditions, for example, vary from year to year and place to place. They influence the use of pesticides and the amount of water needed by crops. More importantly, weather affects the size of the yield. And all three of these factors together determine the cost per bushel.



Capital costs (equipment, etc.) will not apply at all to some home gardeners and canners, in part to others, and in full to still others. Two sets of values have been, therefore, computed for capital cost items. The higher value was derived by assigning the entire capital cost to the first year's gardening/canning operation. The lower figure assumes a 20-year usage of capital items, with costs pro-rated over that period.

The figure assumes (arbitrarily) that a typical family will put up 180 quarts per season (total for all commodities). If a family cans substantially more or less, its capital cost per quart figures will change accordingly, downward or upward.

Itemized costs in Tables 1 and 2 will vary in different parts of the U.S.



Values in the tables should be adjusted to compensate for local prices or for variation in yield. Similarly, the figures for quart jars canned per season should be adjusted to the family situation. In this manner, it should be possible to obtain total cost figures under local area and individual family conditions that are comparable in accuracy to those in the tables, which reflect conditions in East Lansing, Michigan, at the time of this study.

All of a harvested product may not be home-canned. A small harvest may not be worth bothering with, while one that is too large sometimes requires more kitchen time than is available. Costs computed in this study are unaffected as long as all of the harvested product is utilized (e.g., fresh or frozen). Spoilage losses and giveaways, however, both result in higher net costs per bushel.

Home canners who buy all their produce for canning can compare costs only by using local prices (farmers' market, roadside market, or supermarket), and these will vary greatly from year to year. In the East Lansing, Michigan, area during the summer of 1975, the average roadside stand price per bushel of green beans was about \$8 (compared to the Table 1 price per bushel for home-grown beans (excluding capital costs), of \$4.73). For tomatoes, it was about \$6 per bushel for No. 1 tomatoes at the local roadside markets vs. the value in Table 1 of \$2.11 per bushel for home-grown (excluding capital costs).

