How to Freeze Summer Fruits

We froze six kinds of popular summer fruits, using up to seven different methods, then thawed them six months later to find out what worked best. BY MARYELLEN DRISCOLL

Freezing is one of the most effortless methods for preserving fruits. It requires no special equipment or extraneous preparation. But as pure as the process might seem, a few months of freezer storage can destroy all the fresh summer succulence a fruit once embodied. Sweet strawberries can turn to sour mush, and peaches frozen at their peak of ripeness thaw into brown, slippery waste. I wanted a sure-fire way to take my favorite summer fruits from the local "u-pick" farm and store them in the freezer with minimal (albeit reasonable) loss of flavor, color, and texture.

The testing for this story began last summer. We froze six kinds of summer fruits—strawberries, raspberries, cherries, blueberries, peaches, and nectarines—using the methods most commonly recommended in books on preserving. Each fruit was frozen with no additions whatsoever as well as mixed with sugar, sugar syrup, or one of these two combined with ascorbic acid.

After six months in the test kitchen freezer, the fruits were thawed and rated in a series of blind tastings. Unfortunately, our test results did not provide us with a blanket technique for freezing all fruits. But we did find certain consistencies across the board. Most important, we found that all of the fruits turned mushy, picked up strong off flavors, or experienced significant flavor loss if not frozen in sugar or a sugar syrup. The probable reason for this, according to Kenneth Hall, professor of nutritional sciences at the University of Connecticut, is that sugar both enhances fruity flavor and retards solubility, so the fruit stays firmer. Freezing in sugar syrups offers a third advantage, explained Hall, by creating a physical barrier between the fruit and oxygen. Oxidation is often the culprit when off flavors develop in frozen fruits. Oddly, however, those fruits which froze best mixed with sugar did not preserve well at all with sugar syrup, and vice versa. No form of sugar was able to salvage the cherries, which verged on inedible with every method used.

While canning fruits destroys the troublesome organisms that trigger chemical reactions causing fruits to spoil, freezing fruits at home does not. Home freezers simply do not get cold enough to completely stop the enzymatic actions that cause fruit to go bad over time, according to Diane Barrett, a fruit-processing specialist in the Department of Food Science and Technology at the University of California at U.C. Davis. There are other drawbacks to freezing fruits in a standard home freezer. The gradual freezing process forms large ice crystals in the fruit that can tear cell walls and reduce firmness, and the fluctuating temperatures of a freezer's defrost cycle will contribute to freezer burn. All of this does not mean, however, that Barrett does not freeze fruits at home. She simply advises, "People should try to use their frozen foods as soon as possible." After a year in the freezer, it's best to start over with a fresh crop.

Presented here are recipes and tips for freezing each of the fruits tested (except for cherries, which should be eaten fresh). A series of master steps outline the general technique recommended to avoid freezer burn, oxidation, and other potentially harmful effects of freezing fruits.

MASTER STEPS FOR FREEZING FRUITS

1. For freezer bags: Fit a labeled and dated quart-size zipper-lock freezer bag into a 2-cup liquid measuring cup. For easy filling, fold over the mouth of the bag.

2. If using a sugar syrup, fill the bag with 2 cups (1 pint) of prepared fruit and pour sugar syrup over to cover. If tossing the fruit in sugar, spoon 2 cups of the fruit-sugar mixture into bag.

3. Remove as much air as possible from the bag before sealing.

4. Lay the bags flat in a single layer on a cookie sheet to freeze. Do not crowd; make sure there is plenty of space for air to circulate between the bags for the first 24 hours in the freezer.

5. For plastic freezer containers: Label and date the containers. Follow step 2, above, for filling leaving at least ½" headspace for expansion. Run a paring knife around the interior sides of the container to work out air pockets. Crumple wax paper on top of the fruit to minimize exposure to air, seal the container, and freeze.

6. To thaw: Defrost the fruit overnight in the refrigerator. If desired, transfer the fruit to a colander and gently rinse with the sink sprayer to remove excess syrup and sugar. If the fruit is not going to be cooked, it is preferable to eat it while it is semi-frozen and still has a fairly firm texture.

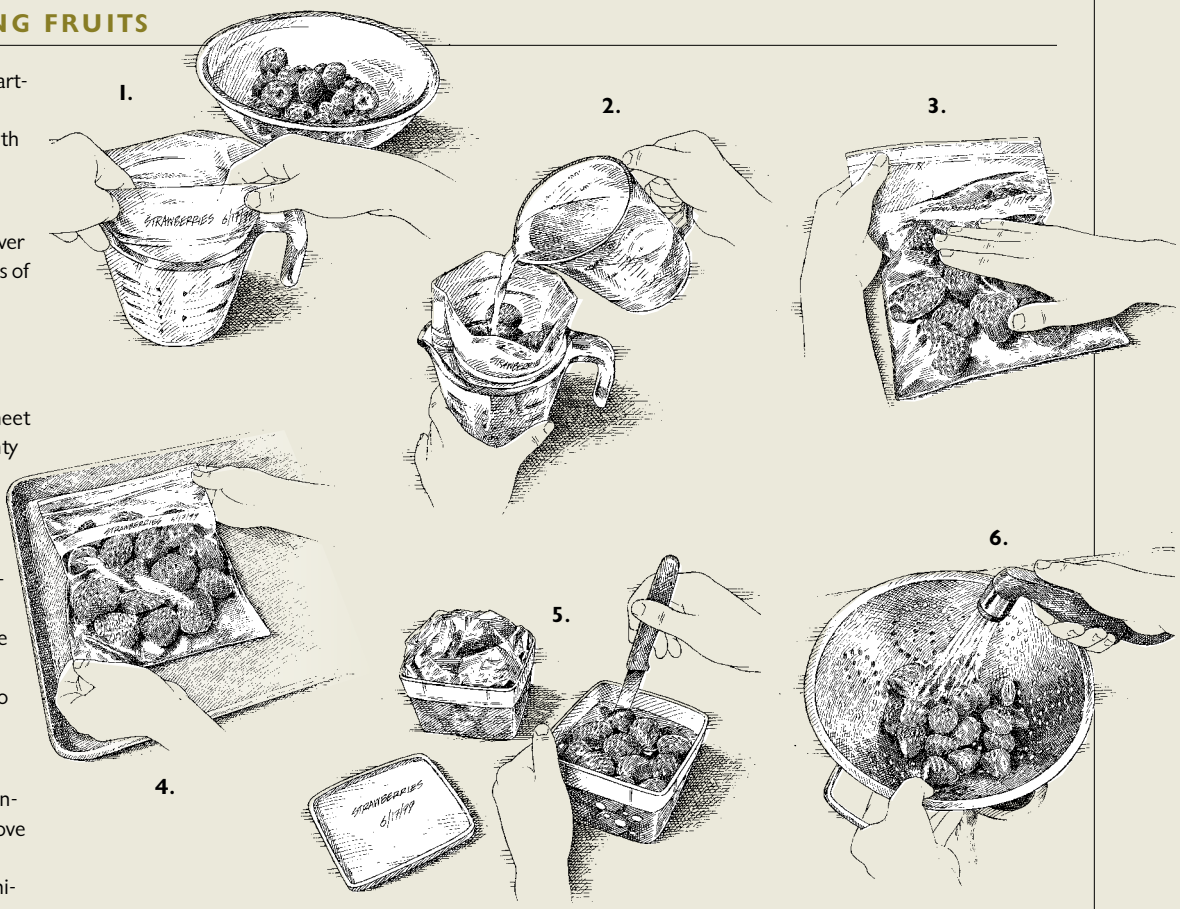


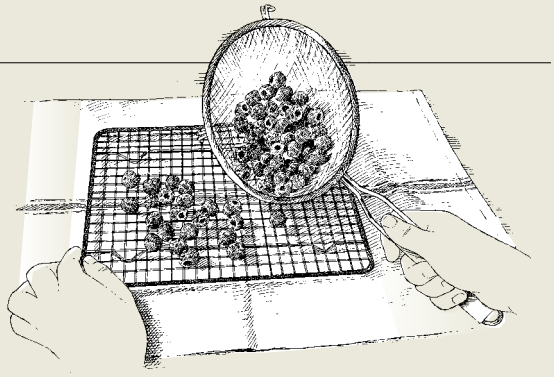
Illustration: John Burgoyne

PREPARING THE FRUIT

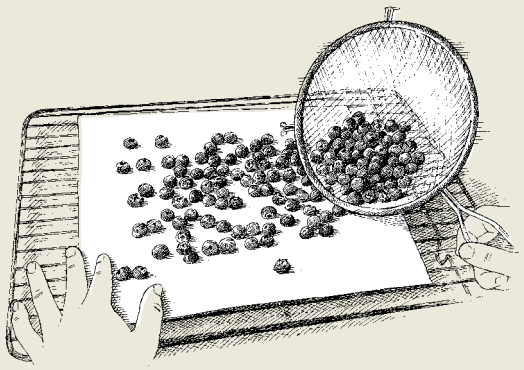
For Berries

A sugar syrup was the hands-down winner with raspberries and strawberries, helping to preserve their bright color, fresh flavor, and texture. Blueberries, however, tasted best when mixed with plain sugar. All berries should be gently rinsed and dried as follows to avoid bruising which imparts off flavors. Hull and halve strawberries, if large, before rinsing. Dry blueberries only partially so that the sugar will adhere to them.

1. Place berries in a sieve or colander and submerge in a large bowl of water.



2. Drain and air dry on a cooling rack, placing a dishcloth, paper towels or a jelly roll pan underneath to catch drips.



3. If the wires in your cooling rack are far apart enough to let small berries fall through, place a layer of paper towels on top of the rack.

FREEZING FRUIT WITH SIMPLE SUGAR SYRUP

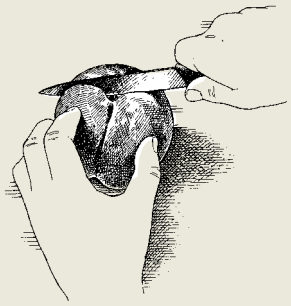
Simple Sugar Syrup: Makes 5¾ cups, enough for 4 pints of raspberries or strawberries or 4 medium nectarines (about 6 cups, sliced). Heat 3 cups sugar and 4 cups water in medium saucepan over medium-high heat, stirring occasionally, until sugar has fully dissolved, about 5 minutes. Cool to room temperature.

Raspberries and Strawberries: Prepare 4 pints berries according to steps 1 through 3, right. Following master steps 1 through 5 for freezing, cover each pint of berries with 1¼ cups sugar syrup.

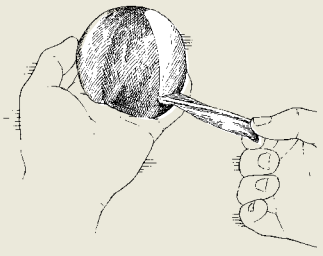
Nectarines: Prepare 4 medium nectarines according to steps 1 and 2 for nectarines (about 6 cups, sliced). Following master steps 1 through 5 for freezing, cover every 2 cups nectarine slices with 1¾ cups sugar syrup.

For Peaches

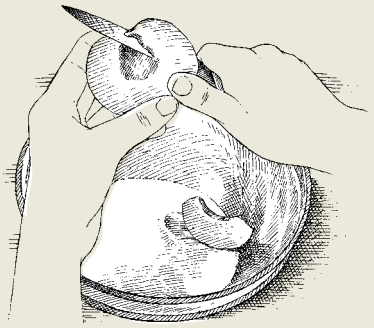
Peaches froze best with the help of some ascorbic acid. Mixing this anti-browning agent with sugar was strongly preferred over using sugar syrup, which created an unfavorably mushy texture. The fruit's plentiful juices dissolved into the sugar to create an ample protective coating. Because peaches are tender at their peak, the process of peeling, pitting, and slicing can make them soft and slippery. To avoid this problem, place whole unpeeled peaches into the freezer until semifrozen, 1½ to 2 hours. If you are using cling peaches, the halves will be difficult to separate; peel them whole and use the slicing technique shown in step 2 for nectarines.



1. Halve the peach by cutting it from pole to pole at a 90-degree angle to the crease, twist halves to separate and pop out the pit.



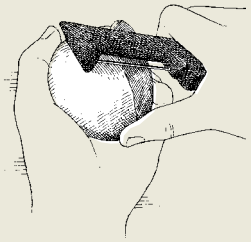
2. The brief freezing process significantly loosens the skin from the flesh, so you can peel away the skin with your fingers.



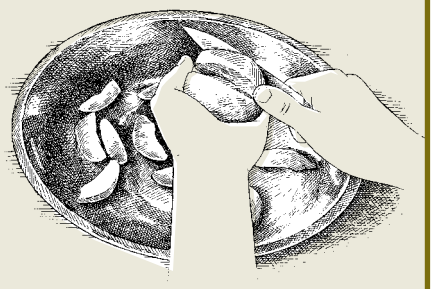
3. Slice over a bowl containing a mix of sugar and ascorbic acid.

For Nectarines

Nectarines fared best in a sugar syrup without the addition of ascorbic acid (though the two combined was a close runner-up). Unlike peaches, nectarines tossed in sugar turned mushy. As with peaches, chill whole unpeeled nectarines until semifrozen, 1½ to 2 hours. If the nectarines do not twist off the pit or peel with the same ease as peaches, follow the steps at right.



1. Peel with a vegetable peeler.



2. Using a paring knife, slice the flesh directly off the pit. For large batches, slice into a bowl of sugar syrup to prevent browning.

FREEZING FRUIT WITH SUGAR

Blueberries: Prepare 4 pints blueberries according to steps 1 through 3 for berries, but dry only partially so sugar will adhere. Gently toss blueberries with 2 cups sugar to coat. Follow master steps 1 through 5 to freeze.

Peaches: Stir together 1½ tablespoons Fruit Fresh (or other similar ascorbic acid–based product) and 1½ cups sugar in large bowl. Prepare 4 medium peaches according to steps 1 and 2 for peaches and slice as in step 3 directly over bowl containing sugar. Toss gently to combine; let stand until peach slices begin to release their juices, 5 to 10 minutes. Follow master steps 1 through 5 to freeze.