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Home Food Preservation Training for Extension Educators

Abstract

During times of economic downturn, there has been an increased interest in home food preservation. As the primary resource for current research-based recommendations, a team of Extension Family and Consumer Sciences educators with specialization in food safety and food preservation responded to this demand by developing a standardized food preservation curriculum to provide programming. The curriculum was used to train Extension Family and Consumer Sciences educators so they could meet the current need of home food preservation requests for programming at the county level.

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Introduction

Since its creation in 1914 with the passing of the Smith-Lever Act (NIFA, 2002), the locally embedded educators of the national Extension system have been using demonstrations, publications, and other methods of dissemination to educate the public on safe home food preservation techniques using research-based information. As the primary source for current research-based recommendations on safe home food preservation, Family and Consumer Sciences educators and/or certified Master Food Preservers deliver educational programs based on information provided by the National Center for Home Food Preservation and *2009 Complete Guide to Home Canning Guide* , as well as state-produced fact sheets. Classroom instruction is a preferred method of teaching food preservation because this method includes lectures, demonstrations, and opportunities for hands-on practice. Extension offices also provide dial gauge testing for pressure canners as part of the educational program on home food preservation (Plate & Albrecht, 2006).

During times of economic downturn, there has been an increased interest in home food preservation. Farm families have planted gardens and preserved produce for generations. During World War II, the

government urged families to plant "Victory Gardens" and to can their surplus for later use. During the 60s and 70s, young women immersed in the back-to-the-land movement rediscovered home canning. Over the course of much of the past three decades, canning, as the primary method of home food preservation, faced serious competition as freezers became a common household appliance.

However, the recent global economic downturn and growing interest in local and organic foods is once again bringing renewed interest to home food preservation. Requests for canning classes are flooding in at a rate not seen in years (Campoy, 2009). Fresh preserving provides a number of benefits that are relevant to today's lifestyles. Canning locally grown produce reduces the carbon footprint created by transporting fruits and vegetables from around the world in off-seasons. Home canning allows consumers to manage their family's nutrition, to manage the ingredients in recipes, and to express one's own food creativity. Preserving locally grown foods allows consumers to capture the flavor of any particular crop in season and extend the availability throughout the year. Today's consumers use email, toll-free hotlines, eXtension—a national online Extension resource—and other social media methods to seek answers to their questions.

Purpose

The purpose of the project described here was to provide a standardized educational program that could enhance the skills of Family and Consumer Sciences educators and effectively address the demand for programming as a result of the changing environment. There were no standardized state-based materials to support this project and no state staff available to provide the needed training. Extension educators are encouraged to continually improve their skills through on-going training. Specialists are usually in charge of the in-service subject matter training provided to county educators. To meet this demand, a team of Extension Family and Consumer Sciences educators with specialization in food safety and home food preservation submitted an innovative grant proposal to their Extension administrative team to develop a standardized state-based food preservation curriculum to meet the needs of this audience. The grant would provide funding to be able to develop materials, provide equipment, and train professionals.

Project Description

The food preservation team set out to develop a standardized state-based food preservation curriculum that included PowerPoint lessons, fact sheets, consumer oriented bulletins, a retrospective evaluation instrument to measure participant knowledge and behavior, and other support materials which would be peer-reviewed for statewide use. Also planned was an in-service to train Family and Consumer Sciences professionals to deliver research-based food preservation information. Materials were developed, and a statewide in-service was held in June of 2010. As a result of the innovative grant funding received, the program was provided free of charge to in-state Extension Family & Consumer Sciences professionals. The lessons and accompanying handout resources were placed on the state family and consumer sciences webpage for use by all educators (Table 1).

Table 1.

Curriculum and Resource Materials

Lessons Developed:

- *Safe, Simple, Easy to Learn:* Preserving Food at Home can be Rewarding
- *Safe, Simple, Easy to Learn:* Freezing Fruits and Vegetables
- *Safe, Simple, Easy to Learn:* Water Bath Canning
- *Safe, Simple, Easy to Learn:* Pressure Canning
- *Safe, Simple, Easy to Learn:* Drying Fruits and Vegetables

Resource Materials:

- Food Preservation Reference Page
- News Release and Radio Script
- Bookmark for marketing
- Retrospective Evaluation
- Demonstration Kit (one provided for each of 9 Extension Education and Research Areas)

The in-service was delivered face-to-face with a focus on basic home food preservation information, which included an introduction to the new instructional materials and a question and answer session. There was ample time for interaction so educators could comment on materials and provide feedback verbally. The face-to-face classroom structure also provided a platform for distribution of a retrospective evaluation with instructions on data collection. For the first time a tool was provided to collect statewide data. The data gathered was used in part to guide the team to the next phase of the project as well as affirm that the teaching methodology was meeting clientele needs. One home food preservation kit was provided for each Extension Education and Research Area. The kit contained a water bath canner, canning and freezing tools, "So Easy to Preserve" instructional DVD, and additional educational materials needed to deliver the program. The team shared success stories concerning the opportunity for cost recovery for this program.

Part two of the in-service consisted of a hands-on lab, which included teaching stations for water bath canning, pressure canning, and freezing. Because of the essential steps needed for both food and personal safety it was essential the Extension professionals felt comfortable with each step of the process. This hands-on experience gave them the opportunity to not only see and hear, but to learn by doing, each step with the proper equipment. As they rotated through each teaching station the pressure canner-testing unit was incorporated so that they could practice testing gauge style

canners and openly discuss some of the common questions that arise during the testing process.

Evaluation

An end of session evaluation was sent to in-service participants 4 weeks after the training via an on-line survey program. By waiting 4 weeks, the participants were able to reflect on their learning experience before responding to the survey. Thirty-two of the 43 in-service participants responded to the on-line questionnaire, for a response rate of 74%.

- 94% of participants responding to the evaluation rated the in-service information as valuable or very valuable.

- 28 participants left comments concerning how they would use the resources provided. Some of the answers included: news articles, hands-on workshops, share with libraries, and for answering questions.

- When asked what other topics they were interested in learning about, participants responded they would like to be provided with yearly updates and learn more about:

  - Pickling; canning meats, jams and jellies, salsa, recipe and diet modifications, meats and wild game, herbs, and how to answer difficult questions.

Summary

The need for Extension to provide research-based information in home food preservation is evident. The value of developing standardized curriculum that will be used statewide and provide training and ongoing support through a team of professionals with specialization in the area is tremendous. The Extension workforce of the future will have less staff at all levels. Using professionals with an area of specialization will be important to be able to provide on-going support for a project. Home food preservation is a programming niche for Extension.

References

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