

Cold Nights, Warm Dinners
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The chill of autumn nights seeps into empty houses waiting for the families to return home for the evening. After a long day of work, school or errands, many people feel too tired to cook, although a hot meal sounds heavenly. Home-preserved food to the rescue!

Jars of soup or spaghetti sauce stand ready to be heated up, combined with pasta or rice and paired with a salad for a quick meal. Too tired to boil noodles? Want the house to smell inviting the minute the door opens? Haul out that slow cooker and make dinner before leaving the house in the morning.

Although the slow cooker works well with almost any food, some things just taste better after 6-8 hours of slow cooking. Most dried beans can be soaked overnight, drained and rinsed and added to the cooker with liquid and spices to make an entirely satisfying dinner for the whole family. Pick up a baguette on the way home to add to the meal. Many cookbooks and reputable internet sites have slow-cooker recipes to choose from. Be careful, though, because the low temperatures of the slow cooker mean the food must cook for a long time to be done completely.

The Oregon State Extension guide to the Magic of Slow Cooker Meals cautions people in the use of the slow cooker. For example, not everyone knows that food should not be frozen when put into a slow cooker. "Slow cookers cook very slowly at low temperatures, and frozen meat won't reach a safe temperature fast enough... The meat should reach 140° F within the first 2 hours of cooking to assure safety." Another safety tip concerns what to do with leftovers. "Cooked food should never be left in the slow cooker to cool. Leftovers should be transferred to shallow containers and cooled quickly in the refrigerator or placed in a sink with cold water to cool before refrigerating."

On a positive note, the OS Extension reminds cooks that "Slow cookers are excellent for low-price meats because the long cooking time tenderizes the meat and improves the flavor." And about that flavor, do not worry about adding extra spices when slow cooking, as the cook "... actually needs less because flavors intensify with prolonged cooking. When adapting recipes, use only half the recommended amounts. ... always add additional seasoning when the dish is done."

Enjoy the crisp fall air and the warm, slow-cooked dinner waiting to be eaten when the day is finished.

For questions about safe home food preservation, or to schedule a speaker for organizations or clubs on the topics of food safety or food preservation, call the Master Food Preservers at (530) 621-5506. For more information, be sure to go to the Master Food Preserver website at http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.org/Master_Food_Preservers/. Sign up to receive our Master Food Preservers E-Newsletter at <http://ucanr.org/mfpenews/>.