

SUCCESSFUL SLOW COOKING

The convenience of cooking with a slow cooker can help save you time and money, but it does take some getting used to.

You might be disappointed with some of your first attempts, but don't give up. With a bit of background knowledge and some good recipes, you'll soon find your slow cooker is one of your favorite appliances in the kitchen.

Here are some tips to help you get started.

CHOOSING A SLOW COOKER

Slow cookers come in a two main shapes: round and oval. The oval shape is more versatile if you are planning to cook larger pieces of meat.

Use the chart below to help you decide what size slow cooker to purchase. If you like to have leftovers, choose a larger size.

Size	Suitable for
3-1/2 quart	2-3 people
4-quart	4 people
5-quart	4-6 people
6-quart	6-8 people; can cook some larger cuts of meat like a ham or small turkey
Larger than 6 quarts	8 or more people and large cuts of meat

Slow cookers come with different options. You can buy a simple standard cooker with a Low, High and Auto settings, or you can opt for a model with electronic options that allow you to set the cooking time and other details. The models with electronic features are generally more expensive.

Don't be confused between slow cookers and Crock Pots. Crock Pot is simply the trademarked name for slow cookers made by the company Rival.

5 TIPS FOR SUCCESS

1. Read the manual

There are lots of different types and brands of slow cookers on the market, and each one works a little bit differently. Take the time to read through your instruction manual to learn about the operating details of your specific appliance.

2. Don't peek

It's tempting to lift the lid to see how your meal is progressing, but every time your slow cooker is opened, the temperature drops 10- 15 degrees. It takes approximately 30 minutes for the temperature to increase again once the lid is closed.

3. Fill 1/2 - 2/3 full

Don't be tempted to over-fill your cooker. If you need to fill it more than 2/3 full (or at the very most $\frac{3}{4}$ full), you need a bigger cooker.

Filling the cooker too full can result in the contents spilling over, and in improperly cooked meals.

4. Use low setting for tough cuts of meat

Slow cookers are perfect for turning tough cuts of meat into tender meals. This happens best on the low setting of your cooker. Don't be tempted to turn the cooker to high in order to speed thing up.

5. Make space

Slow cookers are safe to leave on all day while you are out of the house, but don't take chances. Clean the space around your cooker and get rid of clutter around it while in use to avoid accidents.

5 TIPS FOR IMPROVING FLAVOR

1. Brown meat

Browning meat before adding it to the cooker will add deeper flavor and improved color to the finished dish. It's an extra step that is well worth the few minutes of time it takes.

Heat a pan over med-high heat, and add a teaspoon of oil to the heated pan. Place the meat in the pan and cook for a few minutes on each side until the surfaces are browned.

If you are using small pieces of meat like stewing beef, brown the meat in small batches. If you add too many pieces of meat to the heated pan at one time, you will lower the temperature and the meat will steam instead of browning.

2. Don't add too much wine or alcohol

Liquids don't evaporate during the slow cooking process, so using too much wine or alcohol in your cooker isn't a good idea because the alcohol can easily overwhelm your dish.

If you do want to wine or alcohol, use small amounts, or use it to deglaze your pan if you've browned meat or cooked other ingredients before adding them to the cooker. Simply add the alcohol to the pan after you've removed the cooked ingredients, scraping the pan as it cooks on a med-high temperature. The alcohol will evaporate, and you'll be left with flavorful liquid to add to your slow cooker.

3. Add dairy products and tender, quick cooking vegetables at the end

Dairy products should generally be added during the last hour of cooking. Evaporated milk can be cooked for a longer period of time without curdling or separating.

Tender vegetables like zucchinis and peppers will turn to an unpleasant mush if you add them at the start of the slow cooking process. Add them during the last hour so that they retain their flavor and texture.

4. Add fresh herbs at end of cooking time

Fresh herbs are a great addition to any dish, but if you add them too early in the slow cooking process, they will lose their flavor. Use dried herbs at the start of the slow cooking time, and save your fresh herbs to add the end.

5. Whole vs ground herbs and spices

The flavor of whole herbs and spices will intensify during slow cooking, while ground flavorings will lose their power. If your recipe calls for ground spices, add part at the beginning and save some to

add at the end of cooking, or add extra during the last hour of cooking.

FOOD SAFETY

1. Do not cook frozen food

Meat should be fully thawed before adding to the slow cooker. Meat that is not fully thawed may not reach a safe internal temperature by the end of cooking.

It's important to keep meat out of the 'danger zone': this is the temperature range at which bacteria multiplies rapidly. The danger zone is between 4 degrees C/40 degrees F and 60 degrees C / 140 degrees F.

Unthawed meat will spend too long in the danger zone during the slow cooking process.

2. Heat liquids before adding

If you are adding liquids to your slow cooker recipe, heat them first. This helps food reach the safe temperature zone more quickly.

3. Don't use your slow cooker for reheating foods

The more often foods go through a cooling/heating cycle, the more opportunities there are for bacteria to multiply. Foods reheated in a slow cooker will spend too long in the danger zone – it is best to use the oven, stovetop or microwave for reheating cooked dishes.

4. Don't cook on warm setting

The warm setting on slow cookers is not designed for cooking foods. It will not raise the temperature of the cooked foods above the danger zone. Foods cooked in the slow cooker can be held at the warm setting for up to 2 hours, however.

5. Boil beans for 10 minutes before adding to the slow cooker

Beans cook well in the slow cooker, but if you are using dried beans it is important to boil them for 10 minutes before adding to your cooker.

Many beans contain a naturally occurring toxin called phytohaemagglutinin, which can cause serious gastrointestinal

illness. Kidney beans are particularly high in this toxin, and slow cooking them without boiling them for 10 minutes first can actually increase the strength of the toxin.

Soak dried beans for at least 12 hours, and discard the soaking water. Cover with fresh water and bring to a full boil. Boil for 10 minutes before adding the beans to your slow cooker.

ADAPTING RECIPES FOR THE SLOW COOKER

1. Reduce liquids

Liquid doesn't evaporate during slow cooking – in fact, the amount of liquid in your recipe will usually increase during the cooking process. When you are adapting a recipe for slow cooking, reduce any liquid called for by half.

2. Adjust herbs and spices

Note what kind of herbs and spices are called for in your recipe. Consider replacing fresh herbs with dried, or using both in order to maintain the flavor.

3. Calculate cooking time

When you are trying to figure out how long to cook something in your slow cooker, a general rule for calculating is:

1 hour at 350 degrees F in the oven =
6-8 hours (low) / 4-6 hours (high) in the slow cooker

The time range is due to the fact that every slow cooker is different, so it's important to get to know your particular appliance.