

Making Dried Fruit Leather

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Fruit leather is a nutritious treat for young and old alike. The leathery sheets of dried fruit purée are easy to make at home using either fresh or canned fruits.

Many fruits are suitable for fruit leather, including apples, apricots, bananas, berries, cherries, grapes, oranges, pears, pineapples, plums, strawberries, tangerines, and tomatoes.

Fruit combinations make a variety of flavors possible. Be creative! For example, tart rhubarb blends well with sweet strawberries. Other excellent combinations are pears with apricots and bananas with strawberries.

You can add your favorite seasonings by blending them with the purée or sprinkling them on before drying. For example, apple pie seasoning is appealing in applesauce leather.

Add toppings such as coconut, slivered almonds, or chopped filberts before leathers are dry.

Yogurt adds interest to fruit leather. Try blending 6 cups of berries (strained) with 8 ounces of plain or flavored yogurt and 2 Tablespoons of sugar for flavoring (optional).

For a vegetable leather, try pizza. Blend one 15-ounce can of stewed tomatoes (drained) with one 8-ounce can of tomato sauce and 1 teaspoon of sugar (optional). Pour the purée on a drying tray and sprinkle with leaf oregano, leaf basil, and garlic salt for a taste treat.

Equipment needed

- Shallow pans (about 12 by 17 inches)
- Plastic wrap
- Electric blender or food mill
- Double boiler for cooking the purée
- Large, heavy saucepan for concentrating the purée
- Nylon net or cheesecloth for sun drying



Selecting and preparing fresh fruit

- Select fruits that are ripe but not spoiled. You can use fruits with minor blemishes and bruises that are not suitable for canning or freezing if you remove the imperfections.
- Sort and wash. Remove stems.
- Cut away blemishes.
- Pare or peel if necessary. Pare apples, peaches, pears, and pineapples; peel bananas and tomatoes; peel oranges and tangerines and remove white membrane.
- Pit, core, or remove seeds if necessary. Pit apricots, cherries, peaches, and plums; core apples, pears, and pineapples; remove seeds from oranges and from Concord and Tokay grapes.
- Cut fruit into slices or chunks that can be puréed or ground easily.
- Make the purée immediately to avoid excessive browning.

Making fresh fruit purée

You can prepare the fresh fruit purée by either the cooked or the uncooked method. The color of light fruits may be better if preserved by the cooked method. This method also is more satisfactory for hard fruits that must be softened before being puréed. The uncooked method is faster, however.

Cooked method

Fruit can be puréed when hot (*hot break* method) or when cold (*cold break* method). The results will be different. The hot break method retains more of the natural fruit flavor and preserves the light colors of fruit. The cold break method is faster, however.

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Hot break method. Place pieces of fruit in the top of a double boiler to avoid scorching. Cover and cook over boiling water 15 minutes. Remove from heat and cool. Purée fruit in a blender, using an appropriate speed, or grind in a food mill, using the finest blade.

Cold break method. Purée pieces of fruit in a blender, using an appropriate speed, or grind in a food mill, using the finest blade. Immediately place fruit in the top of a double boiler. Cover and cook over boiling water 10 minutes.

Concentrating the purée. You can concentrate juicy purée to shorten the drying time. Place the ground or puréed fruit in a heavy, deep saucepan. (If desired, add 1 Tablespoon sugar to each 1¼ cups of purée to decrease cooking time.) Cook the purée over low heat, stirring constantly, until the mixture thickens. Remove from heat and cool.

Uncooked method

Purée pieces of raw fruit in a blender, using the appropriate speed, or grind in a food mill, using the finest blade. Run berry purée through a strainer to remove seeds if desired. You can concentrate juicy purée by following the instructions above for concentrating the purée.

Making canned fruit purée

Canned fruit, including baby food without tapioca, is suitable for fruit leather. Drain whole fruit and purée in a blender, using the appropriate speed, or grind in a food mill, using the finest blade. You can concentrate juicy purée; follow the instructions above for concentrating the purée.

Preserving fruit color

Light-color fruit leather (such as apple, peach, apricot, pear, and banana) tends to darken during drying. If desired, you can preserve colors by adding ascorbic acid or fruit juices according to the following directions.

Ascorbic acid (Vitamin C). Use one of three methods:

- **Crystals.** Available from some pharmacies. Add ¼ teaspoon crystals to 2 cups of purée and mix well.
- **Tablets.** Crush 750 mg. Add to 2 cups of purée and mix well.
- **Commercial mixtures containing ascorbic acid.** These mixtures (often used to prepare fruits for freezing) are not as effective as pure ascorbic acid. Follow label instructions.

Fruit juice. Adding pineapple juice or lemon juice may help prevent browning (orange juice tends to cause browning). The flavor of the dried fruit will depend on the type of juice used.

Flavoring the purée

Sweeten the purée to taste with sugar or honey. (Honey makes a stickier leather.) You also may add any of a variety of spices such as nutmeg, cinnamon, and allspice. For variation in texture, add finely chopped nuts or coconut.

Drying the purée

- Line 12- by 17-inch shallow pans with plastic wrap. (Each sheet will hold 2 cups of purée.)
- Pour purée on the plastic wrap and spread to a ⅛- to ¼-inch thickness.
- Dry in an oven or a dehydrator, or under direct sunlight. (Note: The plastic wrap will not melt at the low drying temperatures used.)

Oven drying

Electric and gas ovens with automatic shutoffs for temperature regulation are suitable. Place oven racks 2 inches apart, with 3-inch clearance from the top and bottom of the oven.

Set the oven on the lowest setting, and prop the door open with a potholder or a stick to let moisture escape. (The opening will vary from a ½-inch crack for electric ovens up to 8 inches for gas ovens.) The temperature should be

maintained at 140°F during drying, so it's best to use an oven thermometer. Turn and rotate the pans each hour or two. Drying time will vary from 4 to 8 hours depending on the temperature, humidity, and type and amount of purée.

Sun drying

Put cheesecloth over, but not touching, the purée to protect from insects. Place trays in direct sunlight. Take trays indoors at night if there is a possibility of moisture. Drying time will vary from 8 hours to 2 days depending on temperature and humidity.

Dehydrator

Maintain the temperature at 135 to 140°F. Drying time will vary from 4 to 8 hours.

Test for doneness

The leather should feel tacky but should not contain any moisture.

Storing the leather

To store whole sheets of fruit leather, roll like a scroll within plastic wrap. If you want bite-size pieces for snacks, cut 1-inch slices from a rolled leather.

Store in plastic freezer bags or tightly sealed containers in a cool, dry place. Check periodically and discard any moldy leather.

For long-term storage, refrigerate or freeze the leather.

Using fruit leather

Fruit leather is easy to eat and convenient to pack. It makes ideal snacks at home, on the trail, or on the ski slopes. Use fruit leather in place of raisins for cooking, too.