

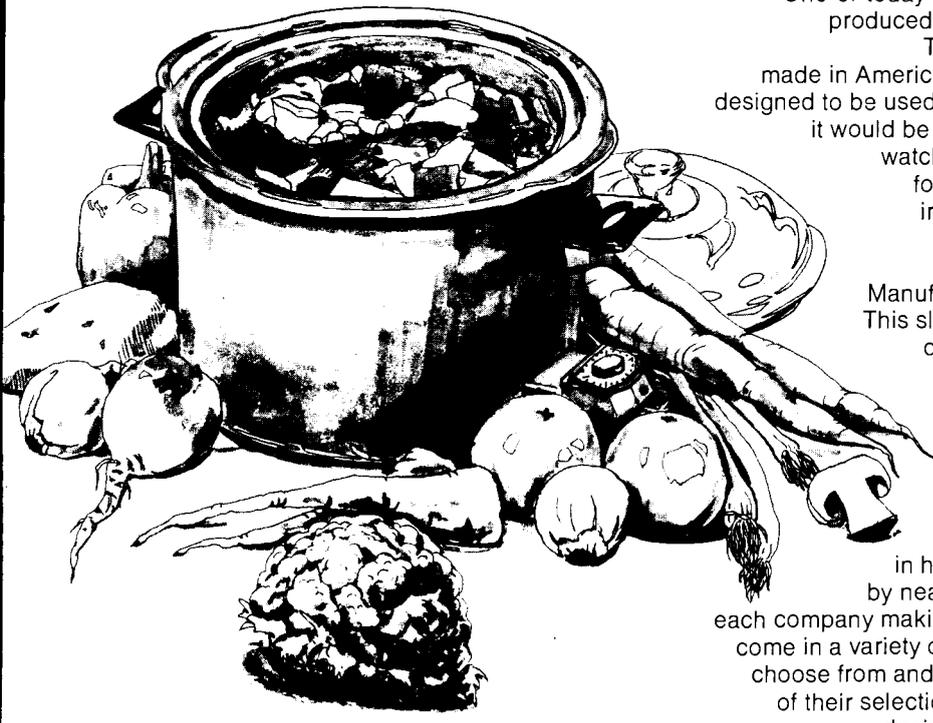
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Choosing and Using a SLOW COOKER

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One of today's most popular pieces of cookware was first produced in Massachusetts in 1642—the *slow cooker*. The first known manufactured cooking utensil made in America was a small one-quart, cast-iron pot. It was designed to be used for slow cooking over an open hearth where it would be surrounded by heat and not require constant watching and stirring. The size was chosen so the food would heat through in several hours. Cast iron was used because it heats evenly, slowly, and retains heat well. In 1971, the updated version made its debut. Rival Manufacturing Company presented its Crock Pot®. This slow-cooker was also designed with heat conduction and retention in mind to give freedom from watching and stirring—the advantages of open hearth cooking in a modern electrical appliance. Designed with a crockery liner, wrapped in the heating element, it had just the right properties for slow cooking principles. Since that time, a new era has arrived in housewares! Now slow-cookers are produced by nearly every small appliance manufacturer, with each company making a few adaptations to be competitive. They come in a variety of colors, sizes, and finishes. With so many to choose from and with various features available, a knowledge of their selection, use, and care will allow you to make wise decisions. These are questions commonly asked:

Why talk about slow-cookers when everyone is looking for faster ways to prepare meals?

This is a good question, and a logical one, since other popular appliances, such as the pressure cooker and the microwave oven, are promoted as time savers that prepare foods in minutes instead of hours. Slow-cookers are designed with conservation in mind, to help you budget your time and money more effectively. Even though cooking time may be from 4 to 15 hours, the main advantage of a slow-cooker is that of *convenience*. All specified ingredients can be added, the dial set to the desired temperature, and cooking takes care of itself. For the most part, slow-cookers require no turning, stirring, or heat adjustment once the long cooking process starts. They don't require exact timing. This given new freedom to many people used to a cooking process that requires constant attention. If you don't have to watch the pot, obviously you have more time away from routine

cooking. This feature alone makes the appliance ideal for anyone who leads a busy life. They are a handy way to keep foods hot. With family schedules so varied, even meals delayed an hour or two will not be ruined since the temperature is low enough to hold foods at simmer. This could allow you to prepare one dish in your oven at one temperature, store it in the cooker on Low, and use the oven to prepare another food requiring a different temperature or cooking time.

What actually is "slow-cooking"?

Slow-cooking means foods are cooked for several hours with low, even temperatures, at what food experts would call a true simmer. The old time, slowly bubbling, fireplace pot and electricity have been combined to achieve this. Modern technology in construction and design have been added. The result is even heat distribution alleviating hot spots which cause sticking, scorching, and burning; ultimately, constant watching is eliminated.



Cooking occurs in slow-cooking pots in several ways. The most obvious is from the heating element, which may be localized on the bottom or in a coil unit encircling the pot. With this appliance, the lid is an important cooking component. It traps steam, creating an atmosphere above foods that helps to cook from the top as well as from the heating source. If you remove the lid during cooking, the steam is lost and it takes 15 to 20 minutes to regain the lost temperature and steam. Thus, removing the lid during cooking means a longer cooking time will be required and more liquid would need to be added.

Because of the trapped steam, slow-cooking is a form of moist heat cookery. This is the reason less tender cuts of meat are good choices for its use. Slow-cooking does not boil away natural juices, so there is less chance of overcooking foods or causing meat shrinkage. Even though foods may be cooked all day (or night), the moist heat over a long, slow, simmering time prevents foods from drying out and enhances the subtle flavors of combined food items.

Isn't it expensive to use an appliance for that length of time just to cook one meal (or part of a meal)?

As we become more conscious of conserving resources, buying and using another electrical appliance may sound wasteful. Actually, a slow-cooker is energy saving as well as labor saving. Most slow-cookers use less energy than other appliances doing the same tasks. At lower settings they will use less electrical energy than a 100 watt light bulb. Based on the national average for electrical costs (3.5 cents per kilowatt hour), all day cooking with a slow-cooker using 125-200 watts per hour would cost about 5¢. Compare this with about 56¢ that it would cost to operate a range unit at simmer for the same length of time. Also be aware that the stated wattage does not mean a cooker uses that amount of energy constantly. With a thermostatic control, energy is only being consumed as the cycle turns the element on; during off intervals, the cooker is not drawing any power. Usually an indicator light shows you the On and Off cycles.

Even though a slow-cooker operates for hours, its crockery liner and insulation keep heat inside—not affecting the kitchen temperature. The thermostatic control, low heat, and insulation mean you can safely leave this electrical appliance on even though you're away from home during the day.

Think of expense in several ways. We now know this appliance can be energy saving as well as labor saving. Other resources are also considered when one has a slow-cooker. A distinct money saving advantage comes from the fact that the slow-cooking temperature is extended over a long period of time; this makes slow-cookers well suited for cooking less tender, less costly, cuts of meat. The conservation in clean-up is also important. One-pot cooking eliminates the many bowls, pans, or skillets you might normally use in preparing and serving similar meals since preparation, cooking, and serving can be done in the same utensil.

Aren't nutrients lost when foods are cooked for a long time?

Nutrient loss is minimal in a slow-cooker. Nutrient destruction is minimized when foods are cooked at a low temperature just until properly done. Water soluble nutrients, such as Vitamins B and C, are well-retained when small quantities of water are used for cooking. The water remaining after cooking can be used for tasty soups and gravies.

Are foods safe when cooked (or held) at a low temperature setting?

Bacteria grow rapidly in the temperature range of 60° to 125° F. (15.6° to 51.2° C.) Foods may not be safe if held for more than two to three hours in this dangerous temperature zone. To insure safety, food should be at a temperature above 140° F. (60° C.) or below 40° F. (4.5° C.).

As cooking begins, the internal temperature of food in the cooker will be in the dangerous range. Because slow-cooking uses low temperatures, it is important that the inside temperature of the food becomes hot enough to cook properly, avoiding spoilage. Foods can be heated above 125° F. (51.2° C.) more quickly if the cooker is started on the High setting or if the thermostatic dial is set above 300° F. In the models that have an automatic shift, this adjustment is made for you by the cooker's control.

It takes longer for the temperature to rise out of the dangerous zone if the cooker is filled too full. Check the recommended capacity and avoid overloading.

All home canned meats and vegetables should be boiled 15 to 20 minutes *before* adding them to the slow-cooker. The temperature in a slow-cooker is not hot enough to destroy the toxin that causes botulism, a deadly form of food poisoning. This toxin is produced if home canned meats and vegetables have not been processed properly.

After cooking, foods should not be left in crockery slow-cookers for extended periods of time. Because crockery retains heat well, it would keep the food in the dangerous zone for several hours. You can speed the cooling by transferring the food to small, shallow containers and refrigerating immediately.

Can I use my favorite recipes or do I have to use recipes planned especially for slow-cookers?

You might find it helpful at first to try those recipes suggested by the manufacturer. The most obvious difference between those and your own recipes will be in cooking (or baking) time. Times vary with models, so do check the use and care manual enclosed with your cooker. In addition to cooking times for their specific recipes, the manuals generally include guidelines for adapting conventional recipes.

Half the fun of having a new appliance, however, is to do your own creative experimenting. Since temperatures vary with appliances, general recipes suggested for slow-cookers may take some experimenting to adjust them to your own model.

Almost any recipe you would simmer in a covered pan or bake in the oven could be cooked in a slow-cooker successfully. "Baked" potatoes are especially good. Your old favorites may become easier to prepare as some preparation steps are combined or eliminated. Vegetables and lean meats will keep their shape and develop full flavor without pre-browning. Browning and draining the fatter cuts of meat, however, will reduce the fat content in foods.

As a rule-of-thumb, one cup of liquid is enough for nearly all recipes unless uncooked rice or pasta is included. Generally, the amount of liquid in a conventional recipe can be cut in half because there is no evaporation when the cooker lid is on. If this adjustment is not made, sauces or gravies may be watery.

Seasonings also may be reduced, since the long cooking process will intensify the potency of herbs and spices. Flavors are enhanced in slow-cooking; add fresh whole seasonings when possible.

Milk, cream, and sour cream tend to break down during long periods of cooking, so when possible, they should be added during the last hour. This applies also to cooked pasta dishes and soft-flesh fish, that break down in prolonged cooking, and to some vegetables, such as peas, that may lose color and texture.

What's the difference between a slow-cooker and a Crock Pot®?

"Crock Pot" is the registered trade name of only one company's slow-cooker. The universal term is "slow-cooker." The first company to make one named their new invention "Crock Pot," because the food was placed in a crock-lined electrical appliance. Many people refer to their slow-cooker as a "crock-pot" even though it may have been produced by another company.

Not all slow-cookers are made with a crockery liner (which refers to highly glazed and fired varieties of earthen and stoneware), and some have uses other than slow-cooking. Thermostatically controlled cooker/fryers would be one example. They heat quickly, reaching the selected temperature in about 5 minutes. Due to their metallic construction and bottom location of the heating unit, they are more likely to heat unevenly and thus cause food to stick. Some slow-cookers rest on a separate heating device, similar to a mini-hot plate that is thermostatically controlled. These also have localized heat so distribution may not be even.

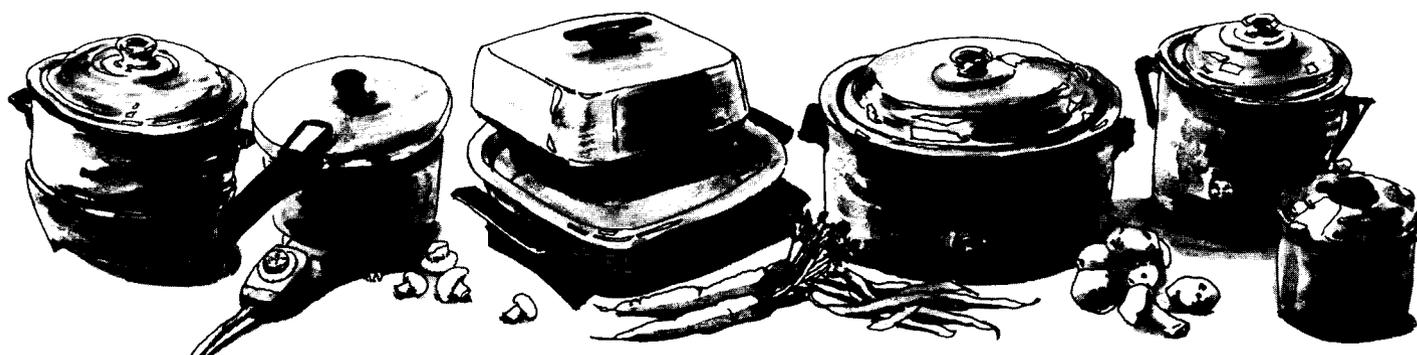
In order for the term "slow-cooker" to apply, the appliance must indeed cook slowly and evenly. The materials from which it is constructed must conduct heat evenly to avoid hot spots where foods would stick, scorch, and burn, or the efficiency and convenience are lost.

How will I know if the appliance I buy will be satisfactory as a slow-cooker?

Even though slow-cooking can be done without an appliance designed specifically for this purpose, those designed for slow-cooking are constructed in layers to give them unique heating characteristics. Knowledge about your specific model's construction will help you care for it properly thus extending the satisfaction of its performance to you.

The outer shell is either metal or plastic. The shell liner, which may or may not be removable, is either glass, crockery, aluminum, or steel. Non-removable liners generally mean the pot is not immersible. Those that are two-part are extra convenient because the liner can be removed for washing or replacing if the glass or crockery should become chipped or cracked. If they are not removable, this could mean purchasing an entirely new cooker! Chipping or cracking can occur from a sharp blow, so use special care around the sink. These liners also may crack if subjected to sudden temperature changes. If the pot is hot, don't fill it with cold water. Those made of pyroceram (Corningware® is an example) have the advantage of being able to withstand sudden temperature changes. Sharp utensils or abrasives used inside the liner may cause chipping or scratching. If the glaze is scratched, a hot spot is created and foods will stick later. A chip or crack may trap foods that can't be cleaned out—ideal places for bacteria to grow.

Liners of aluminum or steel tend to retain heat less well, so they may act as storage containers in the refrigerator for left-overs and can go directly from refrigerator to the heat.



All of the pots should be washed in sudsy water and rinsed thoroughly before their first use to remove film the manufacturer may have applied to protect the inside finish in shipment from the factory to you.

Lids on slow-cookers are either of glass, plastic, or metal and usually do not fit tightly as one might expect in surface cookware.

Since food can be placed in the vessel and not require constant attention, the need to stir is eliminated. Indirect heat means the stirring action, needed in conventional cooking to prevent sticking, is unnecessary. This suggests that the type of heating element also needs to be recognized. Between the shell and the liner is the heating coil. This is located either on the bottom of the shell, or along the sides and bottom, distributing heat evenly to all outside areas of the liner.

As far as performance is concerned, the basic difference between models is whether the cooker is a continuous heat unit or controlled by a thermostatic unit that cycles the heat on and off during cooking. Some models of continuous heat have an automatic shift setting which begins cooking on high, adjusting automatically to a lower setting after about 2 hours for the prolonged cooking. Most of the models with continuous heat have settings of Off, Low, and High. These models have no in-between setting. The dial must indicate one of the settings exactly, or the pot will not heat. Some units have only one setting—when the pot is plugged in it is On and stays at a constant heat until unplugged.

The thermostatic units are generally removable. The control is inserted into the pot, the cord is then plugged into the outlet and then the desired temperature is dialed. To disconnect these, reverse the action; set the dial to Off, remove the plug from the outlet, and then disconnect the control unit. Remember, the probe will be as hot as the temperature dialed, so it should not touch materials harmed by heat. It should also be out of your work area to prevent counters and you from being burned.

Thermostatically controlled units have a light that indicates the heat cycles. After the pot reaches the desired temperature, it is no longer drawing electricity and the light goes out. Temperature is then maintained within a narrow range of degrees by cycling electricity on and off to the heating unit,

What should I look for when I buy one?

Before making this or any new purchase, ask yourself some questions. Slow-cookers are very popular as gift items. If your purchase will be given as a gift, you should be even more careful in answering selection questions.

First ask if it's needed and why. Honest answers to these two basic questions will identify some features personally wanted from an appliance. For example, if you're considering a cooker/fryer and a slow-cooker, you may want to look for an appliance that would perform both functions. There are cooker/fryer units available that have liners for slow-cooking. Some electrical skillet come with a removable crockery liner. You may find an ap-

Consider these features when you choose a slow cooker:

- UL (Underwriters Laboratory) seal of approval on electrical parts as assurance of an electrically safe design
- Size and shape adaptable for family use and considering storage and use space needed
- Location and type of heating element
- Detachable cord for ease of serving and storing
- Thermostatic control to allow a greater variety of uses
- Light to indicate when temperature is reached
- Automatic temperature shift
- Off setting—rather than requiring pot to be unplugged
- Controls easy to reach and read
- Safe to use—internal temperatures do reach food safety standards
- Easy to clean, submersible
- Removable liner—dishwasher safe
- Lid handle permitting easy lifting; dishwasher safe
- Heat resistant handles and legs on shell
- Handles on liner for easy removal when full
- Accessories included—rack for meats, baking molds, trivets
- Complete directions and recipes included
- Other uses possible in addition to slow-cooking

pliance you already own that could be adapted for this purpose. Then ask, how much am I willing to spend to meet this need?

Ask yourself where it will be stored. If plans are to keep it in a hard-to-reach cupboard, it may be used a lot at first, then stored and avoided just because it is difficult to reach.

Think about the kind of cooking done now. Will meal preparation have to change a lot to make this a good investment? For how many people are meals prepared? Do you have any color preferences?

These kinds of decisions should be made before you ever get to the store where you will be faced with many sizes, shapes, models, and makes, along with the sales pressure you may receive. If you know your own needs and wants, a wiser consumer decision will be made. You might, for example, shop for a 2-1/2 quart slow-cooker in harvest gold costing no more than \$30.00. Even with these specifications, you will find many to choose from, but it will be less confusing if you have already eliminated all those on the shelves that don't meet your standards.

Prepared by Janice M. Weber
Extension home management specialist
Oregon State University



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