

Making Dried Fruit Leather

C. Raab and N. Oehler

Fruit leather is a nutritious treat for young and old alike. The leathery sheets of dried fruit puree 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. For example, tart rhubarb blends well with sweet strawberries. Other excellent combinations are pears and apricots, or bananas and strawberries.

Equipment Needed

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

Selecting and Preparing Fresh Fruit

- Select fruits that are ripe but not spoiled. Fruits with minor blemishes and bruises that are not suitable for canning or freezing can be used if the imperfections are removed.
- Sort and wash. Remove stems.
- Cut away blemishes.
- Pare or peel if necessary: Pare apples, peaches, pears, pineapples. Peel bananas and tomatoes. Peel oranges and tangerines and remove white membrane

- Pit, core, or remove seeds if necessary:
Pit apricots, cherries, peaches, plums
Core apples, pears, pineapples
Remove seeds from oranges and Concord and Tokay grapes
- Cut fruit into slices or chunks that can be pureed or ground easily.
- Make the puree immediately to avoid excessive browning.

Making Fresh Fruit Puree

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

Cooked Method

Fruit can be pureed 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.

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

Cold break method: Puree 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 for 10 minutes.

Concentrating the puree: Juicy puree can be concentrated to shorten the drying time. Place the ground or pureed fruit in a heavy, deep saucepan. (If desired, 1 tablespoon of sugar can be added to each 1 1/4 cups of puree to decrease cooking time.) Cook the puree over low heat, stirring constantly, until the mixture thickens. Remove from heat and cool.

Uncooked Method

Puree pieces of raw fruit in a blender, using the appropriate speed, or grind in a food mill, using the finest blade. If a berry puree through a strainer to remove seeds if desired. Juicy puree can be concentrated; follow the instructions for concentrating the puree.



Adults like fruit leather too.

Carolyn Raab is Extension nutrition specialist and Nellie Oehler is former Extension agent and home economist, Oregon State University.

Making Canned Fruit Puree

Canned fruit, including baby food without tapioca, is suitable for fruit leather. Drain whole fruit and puree in a blender, using the appropriate speed or grind in a food mill, using the finest blade. Juicy puree can be concentrated; follow the instructions for *concentrating the puree*.

Preserving Fruit Color

Light-colored fruit leather (such as apple, peach, apricot, pear, and banana) tends to darken during drying. If desired, colors can be preserved by adding ascorbic acid, sodium bisulfite, 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 of crystals to two cups of puree and mix well.
- **Tablets.** Crush 750 mg. Add to two cups of puree and mix well.
- **Commercial mixtures containing ascorbic acid.** These mixtures (often used in preparation of fruits for freezing) are not as effective as pure ascorbic acid. If used, follow label instructions.

Sodium Bisulfite. Available from some pharmacies. Add ¼ teaspoon to two cups of puree and mix well. *Do not* confuse with sodium *bisulfate*.

When using sulfites, measure the recommended quantity accurately. Label sulfite-treated fruit before giving it as gifts. Sulfur dioxide and sulfiting agents (sodium sulfite, sodium bisulfite, and sodium metabisulfite) have proved hazardous to the health of some people. It is currently estimated that 5 percent of asthmatics are sensitive to sulfites. An unknown number of non-asthmatics are sulfite-sensitive. Those persons experience sudden attacks of asthma, difficult breathing, nausea, and diarrhea. In severe cases, death can result. Therefore, persons who are sulfite-sensitive should not use any sulfur-containing products to pretreat fruit before drying.

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

Flavoring the Puree

Sweeten the puree to taste with sugar or honey. (Honey will make a stickier leather.) A variety of spices can be added such as nutmeg, cinnamon, and allspice. For variation in texture, add finely chopped nuts or coconut.

Drying the Puree

- Line 12 by 17 inch shallow pans with plastic wrap. (Each sheet will hold two cups of puree.)
- Pour the puree on the plastic wrap and spread to a ⅛ to ¼ inch thickness.
- Dry in an oven, 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 shut-off for temperature regulation are suitable. Oven racks should be placed 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 inch for gas ovens. Since the temperature should be maintained at 140°F during the drying, an oven thermometer should be used. 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 puree.

Sun Drying

Put cheesecloth over, but not touching, the puree for protection 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

The temperature should be maintained at 135°F 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

For storing whole sheets of fruit leather, roll like a scroll within plastic wrap. If you want bite-sized 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, the leather should be refrigerated or frozen.

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.

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