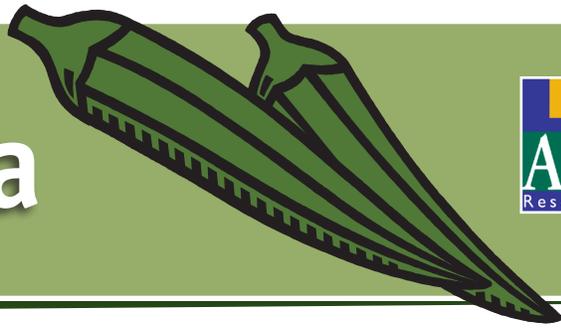


Freezing Okra



Okra is one of the favorite summer vegetables in the Southern diet because it grows through the hot summer months when few other fresh garden vegetables are available. This annual plant is native to West Africa and is a close kin to cotton. It is widely cultivated in tropical and subtropical countries where the fruit, or pod, is known under its Bantu name, “gumbo.”

Okra is served in a variety of ways – boiled, fried, smothered, stewed and pickled. It is a popular addition to soups and gumbos, adding a distinct and unique flavor, and functioning as a thickening agent. The old-fashioned Southern custom of boiling whole pods of okra on top of butter beans or field peas not only adds flavor to both vegetables, but serves as a way of retaining more of the water-soluble vitamins and minerals. Large amounts of these are normally lost when the excess cooking water is drained from boiled okra. Cooking liquid from peas and beans is often consumed, usually with cornbread.

Nutritive Value

Immature pods of okra are a good source of vitamin C, carotene, niacin, calcium, iron and dietary fiber. As the pods mature, vitamin C content decreases. Okra is low in calories. Ten 3-inch pods have only 30 calories.

Selection

Good quality okra is young, turgid, fresh, clean and tender. Check for tenderness in any variety by pressing the tip of the pod. If it snaps, it’s tender. The smooth varieties freeze as well as or better than the ridged varieties because they do not split as easily.

Pick small- to medium-size pods of varieties such as Louisiana Green Velvet, and use them as quickly as possible. Large pod varieties, such as Emerald and cow horn, have long pods even when young and immature. Pick them while they are still tender. If okra must be held, store them in the vegetable crisper or plastic bags in the refrigerator. Okra held too long becomes shriveled and discolored and loses flavor and vitamin C.

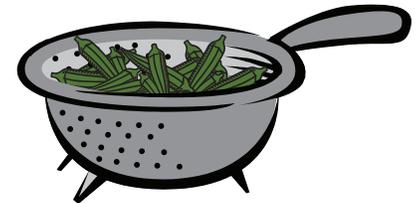
Freezing Fresh Okra

The fresh flavor of okra can be enjoyed all winter by freezing the summer surplus.

Begin by washing the okra thoroughly. Cut off the stems in such a way as not to open the seed cells. Bring a gallon of water to a boil to blanch the okra to stop the action of the enzymes. Use either a blancher with a blanching basket or a large pot fitted with a wire basket and a lid. Cover the pot.

When the water returns to a boil, begin timing. Blanch small pods 3 minutes and large pods 4 minutes.

Remove pods from the boiling water, drain and cool quickly in ice water or cold running water. Drain and leave whole or slice crosswise. Package them airtight in moisture/vapor-proof freezing bags or containers. A good way to force the air from the freezer bags is to submerge all but the bag opening in water before closing. Seal and freeze at zero degrees or below.



Freezing Cut Okra

Even for dishes that use cut okra, it’s usually easier to blanch and freeze the okra whole as described above. When ready to use, defrost slightly and cut crosswise with a sharp knife.



1. To fry frozen okra, slice, thaw, stir a few times to moisten the surface, and then shake in a sack with a cornmeal or breading mixture. You also may dip the okra in an egg-milk mixture before coating with meal or flour.

2. Slice blanched okra crosswise and coat with meal or flour. Spread in a single layer on shallow trays. Place in freezer just long enough to freeze firm. Package quickly, leaving 1/2-inch headspace. Seal and freeze.

3. Wash okra; cut into crosswise slices and heat in a skillet or in a shallow pan in the oven to destroy enzyme action. After slicing, the okra cannot be blanched in boiling water. Okra may be coated with cornmeal or flour before heating but salt should not be added.

a. Oven - Place sliced okra in a single layer on a cookie sheet or in a shallow pan. Heat in a 300-degree oven about 20 minutes, a 350-degree oven about 12 minutes. Turn okra over once while heating.

b. Pan or skillet - Cover bottom of pan well with cooking oil. Heat pan and stir in okra, coating it with hot oil. Heat on medium heat setting 6 to 8 minutes, stirring occasionally.

4. To cool heated okra quickly before freezing, transfer okra from hot pan to another container and set on ice or in a shallow pan of ice water.

Package airtight in moisture vapor-proof freezing bags or containers leaving 1/2 inch headspace. Seal and freeze at zero degrees or below.



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