

FOOD PROCESSING AND PRESERVATION SURVIVAL GUIDE

From harvest to clean processing, cooking, drying, smoking, storage and spoilage control.



08

FROM

HARVEST

TO

STORAGE

FROM HARVEST TO STORAGE.

SYSTEM PRIORITIES

START WITH THE SYSTEM

Protect the calories after the harvest

Food value can be lost through contamination, heat, moisture, insects, scavengers and poor workflow. The preservation system begins before processing: clean tools, a defined dirty zone, rapid cooling and a storage plan matched to weather.

1 Core principles

- Separate dirty work, clean meat, drinking water, sleeping gear and waste. Camp convenience is not a sanitation plan.
- Cool edible portions quickly. Large warm masses hold heat and spoil faster than thin, ventilated pieces.
- Cook hazardous foods thoroughly and protect cooked food from raw surfaces and hands.
- Drying and smoking require thin uniform pieces, airflow, weather protection and repeated inspection.
- Use every lawful edible portion that can be handled safely, but discard food showing credible spoilage or contamination.

A productive day can become a medical problem overnight when processing and storage are improvised after dark.

2 First-hour priorities

- Prepare knife, clean surface, water, hanging or cooling location, waste route and storage before processing.
- Move the harvest from sun, standing water, soil and insects as quickly as practical.
- Remove contamination with controlled trimming rather than spreading it through rinsing or dirty cloth.
- Divide large portions so heat can escape; protect them from animals while cooling.
- Choose immediate cooking, short-term cooling, drying, smoking or another lawful method based on weather and volume.

When refrigeration is unavailable, small batches and rapid decisions are safer than assuming smoke alone preserves anything.

FIELD RULE

Harvest is not complete until the food is clean, cooled or cooked, protected, inventoried and scheduled for inspection.

PRESERVATION METHOD DECISION MATRIX

CHOOSE DELIBERATELY

Preservation method decision matrix

No single method fits every food or weather pattern. Choose by food thickness, ambient conditions, fuel, airflow, time and animal pressure.

Method	Best conditions	Strength	Main risk
Immediate cooking	Small harvest; uncertain weather; food needed now	Fastest path to safe consumption when cooked thoroughly	Leftovers still require protection and timely use.
Boiling or stewing	Tough tissue, bones, small pieces, reliable pot and fuel	Captures broth, fat and soluble nutrients	Fuel intensive; cooked food remains perishable.
Roasting	Controlled heat and manageable portions	Simple, palatable and fast for direct meals	Outside can char while interior remains undercooked.
Drying	Low humidity, steady airflow, thin uniform strips	Lightweight storage with no ongoing fuel	Moist centers, insects, dew and rehydration from weather.
Hot smoking	Reliable fuel, controlled smoke and heat, close supervision	Adds heat and surface drying	Smoke is not a guarantee of shelf stability; uneven heating is common.
Cold storage	Stable near-freezing conditions and animal-secure location	Preserves fresh quality with little processing	Temperature swings, freezing damage, scavengers and hidden warm pockets.
Rendering fat	Clean fat, controlled pot heat and dry storage vessel	Concentrates high-value calories	Water, tissue residue and overheating accelerate spoilage.

Decision note: Use conservative holding times. Without measured refrigeration and validated processing controls, preserved food needs frequent inspection and prompt consumption.

HARVEST-TO-STORAGE WORKFLOW

REPEATABLE BEATS HEROIC

Harvest-to-storage workflow

The sequence protects both food and camp. Set zones first; then move the material in one direction from dirty to clean.

1

PLAN THE ZONES

Choose a processing area downhill and away from sleeping and clean-water work. Prepare clean surfaces, tools, hanging points and waste containment.

2

STABILIZE AND COOL

Move food into shade and air. Open large masses, separate portions and prevent stacking that traps heat.

3

PROCESS CLEANLY

Use deliberate cuts, keep hair, feathers, soil, digestive material and dirty tools away from edible portions, and wash hands appropriately.

4

COOK OR PRESERVE

Select a method suited to thickness, fuel and weather. Standardize piece size and record when each batch began.

5

PROTECT AND INSPECT

Store off the ground or in approved animal-resistant systems. Inspect smell, surface, texture, moisture, temperature and pest evidence on schedule.

PROCESSING AND STORAGE SCENARIOS

ADAPT BEFORE CONDITIONS FORCE IT

Processing and storage scenarios

The system changes with harvest size, humidity, temperature and scavenger pressure. Sanitation does not.

1 Small fish or small game

- Process promptly and keep portions shaded.
- Cook whole only when internal tissues can reach safe doneness.
- Use bones and trimmings for broth when lawful and safe.
- Dry small pieces on clean racks with insect protection.
- Remove waste before it becomes a camp attractant.

2 Large harvest

- Prioritize rapid cooling before detailed trimming.
- Divide work into clean labeled batches.
- Protect hanging meat from rain, sun, insects and animals.
- Preserve only what the system can supervise safely.
- Increase inspection frequency as weather warms.

3 Wet or humid weather

- Do not count on air drying.
- Use smaller batches and more direct cooking.
- Keep smokehouse or drying area ventilated rather than sealed with moisture.
- Bring products under cover before dew and rain.
- Discard pieces that remain warm, wet and questionable.

4 Cold-weather cache

- Verify temperatures are consistently cold enough.
- Protect from sun exposure and warm-air pockets.
- Use animal-resistant containment and visible inventory labels.
- Separate raw from cooked food.
- Inspect after every thaw, storm or wildlife visit.

FAILURE MODES AND CORRECTIONS

DIAGNOSE THE SYSTEM

Failure modes and corrections

Spoilage, cross-contamination and wildlife loss rarely come from one dramatic error. They come from small sanitation and inspection failures repeated together.

Failure signal	Likely cause	Best correction
Meat stays warm after processing	Pieces too thick, stacked, poor airflow or warm site	Separate, thin, ventilate and move to a cooler protected location immediately.
Drying surface but soft center	Slices too thick or airflow/humidity inadequate	Recut if safe, increase airflow and heat control, or cook promptly.
Rancid or bitter rendered fat	Water or tissue contamination, overheating, light or warm storage	Discard suspect fat; render clean dry material gently and store sealed, cool and dark.
Animals repeatedly approach storage	Odor, residue, weak containment or food zone too close	Stop food handling, clean camp, upgrade storage and follow local wildlife guidance.
Cooked food contacts raw area	Cross-contaminated tools, hands or surfaces	Re-cook when appropriate, sanitize the workflow and separate clean equipment.
Uncertain odor, slime, swelling or mold	Spoilage or contamination	Do not taste-test. Discard conservatively and review storage conditions.

FIELD CARD, RED FLAGS AND SOURCES

CARRY THE STANDARD

Processing, preservation and storage control card

Food safety in the field depends on conservative judgment. Hunger is persuasive; bacteria are unimpressed.

FIELD CHECKLIST

- ☐ Processing, clean-food, water, sleeping and waste zones separated.
- ☐ Hands, knife, pot and clean surfaces ready before the harvest arrives.
- ☐ Food moved to shade and cooled quickly.
- ☐ Digestive contents, soil, hair, feathers and dirty water kept away from edible portions.
- ☐ Pieces cut to uniform thickness for the chosen method.
- ☐ Batch start time and method recorded.
- ☐ Cooked food protected from raw tools and surfaces.
- ☐ Drying or smoking system has heat, airflow and weather control.
- ☐ Storage is animal-resistant and follows local requirements.
- ☐ Inventory is rotated; oldest or most vulnerable food used first.
- ☐ Food inspected after weather changes and wildlife activity.
- ☐ Questionable food discarded without tasting.

STOP / REASSESS

Food has remained warm for an extended, unknown period.

Foul, sour or unusual odor; slime; gas; swelling; unexpected mold or discoloration.

Digestive contamination cannot be removed cleanly.

Wildlife has accessed or contaminated food storage.

Vomiting, severe diarrhea, fever, confusion or dehydration after eating.

AUTHORITATIVE STARTING POINTS

USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service
<https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation>

CDC - Food Safety
<https://www.cdc.gov/food-safety/>

National Park Service - food and bear safety
<https://www.nps.gov/articles/bearsafetyfood.htm>

USDA Complete Guide to Home Canning
<https://nchfp.uga.edu/resources/category/usda-guide>

Field preservation without controlled refrigeration or validated processing carries risk. This guide does not establish guaranteed shelf life. Use official food-safety guidance and conservative disposal decisions.