

delicious gifts

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Spending some of my teen years in the Appalachian part of Virginia with other young Future Farmers of America and Future Homemakers of America, growing produce, farming and canning was as much a part of daily life as breathing. I recall spending hours during the summertime popping and de-stringing over 30 brown grocery bags full of green beans so that we would have vegetables over the winter. Among other things, we canned regularly: apples (including apple sauce, sliced apples, apple butter), peaches, carrots, potatoes and tomatoes in various forms as well. It was hard work and at the time, being a teen, I did not appreciate the pride of accomplishment nor understand the need of necessity.

Once I became a mother of my own running a family on a tight budget, I learned the value of having what I needed with what really was mean effort and came to appreciate canning. Living in Alaska, many grocery stores would give the bruised or banged up produce not fit for selling to local churches for their food banks. It was at my church that I would end up with a case of nearly less than appealing apples, spend hours carving out spoiled spots, de-coring, peeling skins in preparation for my crock pot apple butter recipe. The house smelled of cinnamon and baked apple as it simmered for nearly twelve hours and eventually the jars were filled, labeled and given as gifts throughout the year. I recalled the days of my youth and my entire seven years in Alaska, with the help of the "throw away produce" was able to can carrots, tomato sauce, whole tomatoes, homemade salsa and yes, the dreaded green beans.

It got to the point that when I would go to the pantry to pull something for that day's meal I dreaded having to use one of MY jars. I valued the effort I had put into them, they looked beautiful and I almost hated to part with them not being part of my pantry.

The truth is, there are tons of simple canning recipe ideas online and many fruits and vegetables can be canned in a large pot of hot boiling water in a few minutes. If sauces, salsas, jams and jellies is not your thing perhaps try some "dry ingredient" jars. For example, layer Oats, raisins, cinnamon, sugar, etc and seal with pretty fabric a bow and a recipe card to just add butter, milk, whatever and baking instructions for the perfect cookies, bars and treats. As well, many brews, ales, moonshines, etc. taste better with age so if you start your year with a recipe by holiday time you can consider your shopping completed way before anyone else has even considered making their lists. A simple square of pretty fabric and a ribbon, a personalized label and you have a beautiful way to give a thoughtful gift, a gift of your time and a gift from your heart. Plus, you could incorporate your canning or packaging into your "together time" and make the process a family affair. As an added bonus, everytime your delicious gift is consumed you will come to mind. And that is always wonderful especially if miles get in the way. So, this year why not make an effort to add the phrase "I CAN" to your vocabulary?

Michelle's mother. Christmas morning in Virginia with a small selection of the canning they did to prepare for the winter months ahead

