

Ask A Professional Home Economist

For Immediate Release

FIX IT AND FORGET IT
(Slow Cooking Tips from Donna-Marie Pye, P.H.Ec.)

In a world of fast food and even faster meal preparation times, the increasing popularity of slow cookers would appear to defy logic. While it has been eclipsed by sexier, high-tech gadgets, the slow cooker remains one of the most popular kitchen appliances today.

Slow cookers are the perfect appliance to fit into anyone's lifestyle. Original slow cooking enthusiasts were busy, young working people who needed to get good food on the table. Thirty years later, there is a second generation of cooks who are discovering the joy of that too. Once you add the ingredients and turn it on, you can forget about it and devote your time to other activities. In fact, since the 1990's, these easy-to-use appliances have enjoyed a phenomenal increase in popularity with sales of over 4 million in North America last year.

Basically, the slow cooker works by simmering food at a constant, low temperature, which enhances the flavor and texture of some ingredients. The LOW setting cooks food at 200° F (90°C), which is below the boiling point, and the HIGH setting cooks food at about 300° F (150°C). (As a general rule, 1 hour of cooking on HIGH equals 2 to 2 ½ hours on low.) Slow cooking tenderizes less expensive cuts of meat such as beef brisket, stewing beef and pork, pork shoulder roasts and chops. The lengthy cooking time tenderizes these tougher cuts of meat and allows the flavors to blend, resulting in tasty soups, stews, chilies and pot roasts.

The slow cooker consists of a metal casing with electric heating coil surrounding a heavy stoneware or ceramic bowl. The stoneware may or may not be removable; however, the removable type is generally preferred for ease of cleaning. The stoneware acts as an excellent insulator and keeps the cooking temperature even and low. As the food begins to heat up, a seal is formed between the stoneware and the covering lid. This keeps the liquid inside from evaporating and virtually eliminates the risk of sticking and scorching. As a result, this means the food doesn't need constant attention and can be left unattended for several hours.

Slow cookers come in round or oval shapes and range in capacity from 2 ½ to 6 quarts. The 2 ½ and 3 ½ quart sizes are usually deep and narrow; 4- and 5-quart sizes are wider and rounder. All are perfect for soups, stews, pot roasts, casseroles and everyday cooking. The large 6-quart size is best for big-batch cooking, for steamed puddings or for recipes that call for larger pieces of meat. Slow cookers also come in a 1-quart size. Although too small for everyday cooking, it is great for warm dips and appetizers, and perfect for entertaining.

Although great for many foods, the slow cooker doesn't cook everything well. The secret, as with all appliances, is to use it for what it does best. Large tender cuts of meat such as a prime rib roast do not benefit from long, slow cooking. Pasta will become very glutinous when added dry to the slow cooker. It is always best to parboil to the tender but firm stage, drain, then add to your slow cooker recipe. Fish does not hold up to long cooking times. Because it is so tender, it will fall apart, leaving you with nothing but flaked fish. If a recipe calls for fish, add it only during the last 20 minutes of cooking time.

While traditionally used during the cold weather months, a slow cooker can be used in warmer weather, when a conventional oven would make the kitchen uncomfortably warm. It will also free up valuable oven space when entertaining or cooking for a crowd. It is also ideal for cooking holiday side dishes – and you can serve from it.

So whether you're new to the world of slow cookers or just taking another look at what that old wedding present can do, get ready to discover all the amazing food you can make with your slow cooker!

Chicken Stew with Rosemary Dumplings (from cookbook Canada's Best Slow Cooker Recipes)

Here's the ultimate comfort food – perfect for the entire family to enjoy while gathered at the kitchen table.

½ cup	all-purpose flour
1 tsp	salt
½ tsp	black pepper
1	whole chicken (about 3 lbs [1.5 kg]), cut into pieces
1 tbsp	vegetable oil
4	large carrots, peeled and sliced 1 inch (2.5 cm) thick
5	stalks celery, sliced ½ inch (1 cm) thick
6	onions, thinly sliced
1 tsp	dried rosemary
2 cups	chicken stock
1 cup	frozen peas

Dumplings:

1 cup	all-purpose flour
2 tsp	baking powder
½ tsp	EACH dried rosemary and salt
½ cup	milk
1	egg, lightly beaten
	Fresh rosemary sprigs

1. In a bowl or plastic bag, combine flour, salt and pepper. In batches, add chicken pieces to flour mixture and toss to coat. Transfer to a plate. In a large nonstick skillet, heat oil over medium-high heat. Add chicken pieces and cook for 8 to 10 minutes or until brown on all sides. Set aside.
2. Add carrots, celery, onions and rosemary to slow cooker. Set chicken pieces over vegetables. Pour ½ cup (125 mL) stock into skillet and cook over medium-high heat, scraping up brown bits from bottom of pan. Pour pan juices into slow cooker along with remaining stock. Cover and cook on **LOW** for 8 to 10 hours or on **HIGH** for 4 to 6 hours, until vegetables are tender and stew is bubbling. Add peas and stir gently to combine.

3. **Dumplings:** In a bowl, sift together flour, baking powder, dried rosemary and salt. In a measuring cup, combine milk and egg. Mix well and add to flour mixture. Stir with a fork to make a lumpy dough (do not overmix – lumps are fine). Drop dumpling mixture over chicken pieces. Cover and cook on **HIGH** for 25 to 30 minutes or until tester inserted in centre of dumpling comes out clean. Serve garnished with fresh rosemary sprigs.

Winter Trail Mix

Chunks of caramelized pecan crunch combine with dried apricots and cherries to make an irresistible tote-along snack. Store in a tightly sealed plastic container and it will keep fresh for up to 1 week.

½ cup	granulated sugar
2 tbsp	melted butter or margarine
1 ½ tbsp	water
½ tsp	vanilla
1 ½ cups	pecan halves
1 cup	whole almonds
2 tsp	finely grated orange zest
1 ½ cups	sesame sticks or pretzel sticks
1 cup	dried apricots
1 cup	dried cherries or dried cranberries

1. In a small glass measure, combine sugar, butter, water and vanilla. Place pecans and almonds in slow cooker; pour butter mixture over nuts and toss to coat.
2. Cover and cook on **HIGH**, stirring frequently for 2 to 3 hours or until sugar mixture is golden brown and nuts are toasted. Stir in orange zest; toss to coat and turn out onto prepared baking sheet. Set aside to cool.
3. In a large bowl or airtight storage container, combine nut mixture with sesame sticks, apricots and cherries.

Makes about 6 cups

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Donna-Marie Pye is a Professional Home Economist, food writer and cookbook author who has developed recipes for a number of publications and food marketing boards. With two active children and a busy family household, she has a first-hand appreciation of how slow cookers can benefit the lives of families.

The Ontario Home Economics Association, a self-regulated body of Professional Home Economists, promotes high professional standards among its members so that they may assist families and individuals to achieve and maintain a desirable quality of life.

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