Extension News You Can Use
Slow Cooker Tips and Techniques

Using a slow cooker is super easy. It is one of the best time-saving appliances in the kitchen. It is great for beginning cooks as well as experienced ones. All you have to do is fill it and turn it on. If you're new to slow cooking, definitely read through the user manual so you know any quirks or requirements of your particular cooker.

In general, here are the basic guidelines we follow when using our slow cooker:

- Do not put frozen food in the slow cooker. Experts recommend that all food should be defrosted before adding to the slow cooker. Frozen food will not allow the safe temperature to be reached quickly enough.
- In most slow cookers, one hour on high is equal to two hours on low.
- Tougher (less expensive) meats with plenty of connecting collagen and muscles make wonderful slow-cooked dishes; they fall apart into those tender, melting meaty morsels.
- Position the cooker at least six inches away from any walls or other appliances so the heat can dissipate.

Preparation
Most slow cooker recipes require only some basic prep work like cutting vegetables or trimming meat before everything gets dumped into the slow cooker. If you have time, you'll get better flavor in your final dish if you also brown the meat and sear the vegetables.

Small, bite-sized pieces of meat, like slices of sausage or crumbles of hamburger, do better and taste better if they are browned on the stove-top before going in the slow cooker. If you don't, the texture and appearance is not as pleasing.

Adding Food to the Slow Cooker
The slow cooker should be between halfway and three-quarters full for best cooking. If your recipe uses liquid, it should come about halfway up the ingredients (or less). Very little liquid will evaporate during cooking.

Remove skin from poultry and trim excess fat from meat.
Vegetables in a slow-cooked dish can be tricky since many of them turn to mush after just a few hours of cooking. Onions, potatoes, carrots, winter squash, and other hard vegetables can be added at the beginning of cooking and do well for any length of cooking. Vegetables like broccoli and cauliflower can handle a few hours of cooking — add them at the beginning when cooking a dish for 4 – 6 hours or add them in the middle when cooking something longer. Delicate, quick-cooking vegetables like peas, corn, spinach, and other greens do best when added to the slow cooker in the last half hour of cooking.

Cayenne pepper and Tabasco tend to become bitter if cooked for long periods. Use small amounts and add toward the end of cooking time.

Lid
The lid should fit snugly over the slow cooker with no gaps for steam to escape. Slow cookers depend on bringing your food up to a stable temperature (usually around 210°F) and keeping it there. If the lid isn't snug, the cooker won't work as efficiently.

Cooking
The cooking temperature is the same on all settings (again, about 210°F), so the setting you choose merely dictates how quickly the slow cooker gets to that temperature. The lower settings (usually 8 hour and 10 hour cooking times) heat food gently, whereas the higher settings (4 hour and 6 hour cooking times) will heat it more quickly. Modern slow cookers are designed to bring food to temperature within a safe window of time and hold it there. You don't need to stir the contents or check it's progress - in fact, this will let heat escape and can disrupt the cooking process. Some recipes will have you add quick-cooking ingredients (like tender vegetables, pasta, or seafood) in the last hour of cooking, but other than that, nothing further is needed.

Most modern models will automatically switch over to a "warming" cycle at the end of cooking if you're not right there. This should keep food hot enough to prevent it from spoiling, but it can overcook your food if used for too long.

You can thicken the juices and concentrate the flavors by removing the lid and cooking on high for the last half hour of cooking.

Choosing a Slow Cooker
Many recipes specify the size of cooker needed. If you use a cooker that is too large, you risk burning your food. A cooker that's too small won't hold all of the ingredients. A family of four may need a 3-4 quart size.

Size - The slow cooker should be at least half full, but no more than ¾ full. If you have a large slow cooker, and are cooking a small amount, to ensure the recipe cooks evenly and at the right speed, simply place the food into an oven-safe dish that fits inside your slow cooker. Place the dish on the bottom of the slow cooker, cover and cook. To cook a turkey breast or whole chicken, you need a large slow cooker (6 – 7 quarts).

Shape - Slow cookers come in round and oval shapes. Round slow cookers are perfect for soups, stews and chili’s. Ovals have more surface area so there’s more room to fit in foods like pork chops and stuffed peppers. With more surface area, they will cook food slightly faster than round slow cookers.
Manual or Programmable - Manual slow cookers have a button or knob with three to four settings: Off, Low, High and sometimes Warm. Programmable slow cookers provide more control. You can set an exact cook time and then the cooker switches to Warm when the cooking time is up. This is helpful when you will be away from home for long periods because today’s slow cookers cook much “hotter” than they did a few decades ago. Most recipes will be way overdone if left to cook for 8 or 10+ hours.

Other Features - Many new slow cookers come with a lock-in-place lid which is great if you plan on taking your slow cooker filled with food to parties and potlucks. See-through lids are nice so you can keep an eye on your food as it cooks. This helps you avoid lifting the lid which releases the steam and slows down the whole cooking process.

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