

## **September 21: Cooking with slow cookers**

With all the new small kitchen appliances, the slow cooker has remained a true staple in many home kitchens. The attraction of the slow cooker is the “set it and forget it” mentality. Occasionally this hands-off approach can still result in underdone vegetables and overdone meat.

Layering within the slow cooker does make a difference in the success of a dish. The heating elements are on the bottom and sides of a slow-cooker so tougher vegetables should be placed on the bottom and up the sides. Tougher vegetables include potatoes, turnips, parsnips, carrots, beets, and winter squash. The next layer can include not-so-tough vegetables such as celery, fennel, green beans, and bell peppers. Any meat and/or poultry should be placed above hearty vegetable to prevent overcooking. This also allows the meat juices drip down and flavor the entire pot. Defrost meat or poultry in the refrigerator and cut into smaller pieces before putting in the slow cooker for more even cooking. The quick-cooking, more delicate, vegetables and canned beans need to be placed on top to preserve texture and individual flavors. Delicate vegetables include zucchini, spinach, cauliflower, broccoli, and peas. Last but not least, do not forget to incorporate liquid into the mix. The liquid like water, broth, or juice is used to prevent food from sticking.

Sautee fresh garlic, onion, or ground meat first before adding them to the slow cooker. This allows the extra fat from ground beef to be removed and the powerful flavors of garlic and onion to be more available. Hearty herbs like rosemary and thyme also make great toppers to food in the slow cooker. If you prefer the flavor of more delicate herbs like parsley, cilantro, and basil, wait until they dish is about to be served.

Soups, stews, chili and casseroles made with ground meat are usually fine to cook on high. Dishes that include poultry tend to become dry if cooked on high. The moist heat of the slow cooker creates a good environment to cook dry beans. Soak dry beans overnight, drain, pour into the crockpot and cover with 2 inches of water, add your favorite spices, and the result will be textured beans much like those that are canned. Dry spices like oregano, cumin, or black pepper flavor beans well and can withstand long cooking times of a slow cooker.

As tempting as it may be, don't peek! Lifting the lid even once can delay food's doneness by 20-30 minutes. Peeking early on in the cooking process can also increase the risk of keeping food in the temperature danger zone, where bacteria can grow rapidly.