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2023 #9

# SUN-DRIED APRICOTS AT HOME

by Theresa Siebert



Sun-dried apricots, with its soft, chewy texture and brilliant flavour, is consumed as a fruit snack or used as an ingredient in many recipes.

deal apricot cultivars for drying should have a strong flavour, bright orange colour and firm flesh. Drying extends the storage-life of fresh apricots with several weeks or even months, depending on the final moisture content and storage conditions.

## FRUIT SELECTION

Apricots are picked very carefully by hand in the mellow-ripe stage when colour and flavour development has reached its optimum, after which the apricots are sorted, also by hand, to remove over-mature, green and damaged fruits. Other unwanted materials such as plant rests, sticks etc. should also be removed.

## WASHING AND SORTING

The apricots are washed in clean water to remove remaining dirt. The wash-water should be replaced at regular intervals to ensure proper cleaning. After washing the apricots are sorted by hand according to colour, size, shape and maturity. Uniformity is very important to ensure that all the apricots in a batch will dry at the same rate.

## CUTTING AND PITTING

The apricots are cut in half along the suture and pitted. This may be done manually using sharp stainless-steel knives or by special cutting machines that are commercially available.

## TREATMENT TO REDUCING THE BROWNING OF DRIED APRICOTS

Apricots undergo browning during drying and subsequent storage. This can be reduced or retarded by treating the fruit with lemon juice. The apricot halves are dipped in lemon juice for 5 - 10 minutes, removed and drained prior to drying.

## SYRUPING

The apricot halves are boiled in a 60 - 70% sugar solution for 10 - 15 minutes and then left to soak for up to 18 hours. Up to

50% of the moisture in the fruit can be removed by this syruping treatment through osmosis. This not only reduces the subsequent required drying time, but also produces a sweeter product with better colour retention. Some of the characteristic fruit flavour is lost by this treatment. The apricots are removed from the syrup, strained and rinsed prior to drying.

## DRYING

The apricots are spread out in a single layer on some sort of support and placed in the sun. The support can be anything from a plastic sheet, slotted wooden racks or trays. It is important that the surrounding area be well covered to minimise contamination of the fruit. Contamination can be reduced by covering the open trays with plastic sheeting or a fine wire mesh. Simple solar dryers in the form of tents and cabinets can also be constructed. Solar dryers not only reduce the drying time, but also reduce losses caused by weather changes, dust, insects and birds.

The time required to reach the final moisture content (15 - 20%) varies according to the weather conditions, especially temperature and wind conditions. Under fair weather conditions, drying is usually complete within 4 - 6 days.

The sun drying process can be accelerated by various practices that make maximum use of solar heat. The support can for instance be painted black to absorb as much heat as possible. This can reduce the drying time by up to 40%.

## SORTING

The dried apricots are sorted to remove badly discoloured or otherwise unfit pieces.

## PACKING AND PRESERVATION

The dried apricots should be packed in moisture-proof packs, unless immediately consumed. Most plastics are suitable. The packaged apricots must be stored in a cool, dry place, away from sunlight to ensure maximum storage life.

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