

Seasonal Eating
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Slow Cooking for Winter
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Slow cookers are a match made in heaven for winter. They make great comfort food type meals that fill the house with delicious aromas that make you anticipate dinner for hours. The bonus is that they require just a little preparation but then cook unattended so they are great for beginning cooks as well as more experienced ones.

Always check your user manual for any quirks or special requirements of your particular cooker, but there are some basic guidelines to follow when using a slow cooker.

First, let's cover the food safety issues. Do not put frozen food in the slow cooker. Frozen foods will not allow the cooker to reach a safe temperature quickly enough. Position the cooker at least six inches away from any walls or other appliances so that the heat can dissipate from the outside. Recipes are designed for specific size cookers so if using a different size you will need to adjust. The cooker should be between $\frac{1}{2}$ and $\frac{2}{3}$ full. If not full enough the food may burn and if overfilled it may not cook properly. If the recipe uses liquid, it should come about halfway up the ingredients or less. Very little liquid will evaporate during cooking (and the food will usually release some moisture as it cooks) so you don't need to start out with a lot of liquid. If your cooker is too large, you can use an oven proof covered container with the food inside. Place it in the bottom of the cooker, cover and cook. Make sure your lid fits snugly or the cooker will not work as efficiently and resist the urge to lift the lid and stir as it will let the heat out and disrupt the cooking process.

Now for some tips on making quality meals. While you can just trim excess fat from meats and put them in the cooker, they will have a much better flavor and appearance if you brown them first in a skillet and then place in the cooker. This is especially true with ground meats. Tougher meats with plenty of connecting collagen and muscles make wonderful slow-cooked dishes such as shoulder roasts, chuck roasts, arm roasts and such. Make sure you remove any skin from poultry and trim excess fat from meat. Vegetables need to be added at different times or they can turn to mush. Onions, potatoes, carrots, winter squash and other hard vegetables can be added at the beginning of cooking while delicate vegetables like peas, corn, spinach and other greens do best when added during the last half hour of cooking. Cayenne and pepper sauce become bitter when cooked for a long time so add those at the end. You can also add some fresh herbs or lemon zest to perk up the flavor of the sauce at the end.

This month, break out your slow cooker and try the hearty Slow Cooker Pork Chops and Sweet Potatoes recipe below. For more recipes, videos and produce information, visit the Bedford County Extension website (bedford.tennessee.edu) and click on Seasonal Eating.



Slow Cooker Pork Chops and Sweet Potatoes

2 teaspoons dried thyme
2 teaspoons salt
1 teaspoon black pepper
8 boneless, center cut pork chops
2 tablespoons vegetable oil
1/2 cup butter
1 onion, cut in half and thinly sliced
4 sweet potatoes, peeled and cut into 1/2" slices
1 cup orange juice
1/4 teaspoon salt

Combine the thyme, salt and pepper. Using half of the seasoning mixture, sprinkle both sides of the pork chops. Heat the oil in large skillet and brown the chops on both sides. Add to slow cooker. Add butter to the skillet with remaining half of the thyme mixture. Cook for a minute then add sliced onions. Cook until slightly softened, about 3 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, spoon the onions over chops, leaving butter in pan. Add sweet potato slices over the onions. Pour in the orange juice and the butter in the skillet. Sprinkle with salt. Cook on high for 3 hours or until pork and potatoes are tender.