

Handling and preservation of fruits and vegetables by combined methods for rural areas

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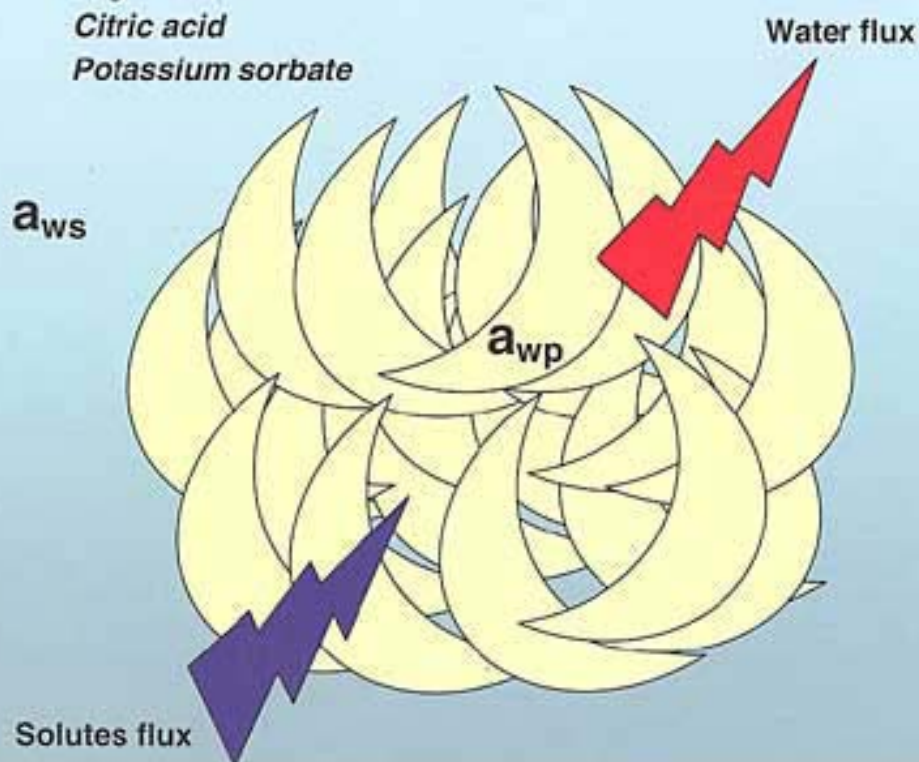
Technical manual

Osmotic Solution

Sugar

Citric acid

Potassium sorbate



FOREWORD

Fruits and vegetables are nutritious, valuable foods full of flavour. However, in the low-income countries, poor care and handling of these crops frequently results in loss of quality, especially when not consumed immediately. In these countries, people are not sufficiently informed on how to make technical choices for better preservation of fruits and vegetables. This manual on handling and preservation of fruits and vegetables by combined methods has been prepared in response to needs, both real and perceived, that surplus crop can be used.

The manual is the result of contributions from a selection of different authors, mainly from countries in Latin America. It contains basic concepts and operations of processing, which are essential for a better understanding and comprehensive approach to the application of the combined methods technology. Some practical examples are described step by step, including calculations and procedures required to set up this technology elsewhere. Likewise, it includes examples of modern processing techniques required to meet the high standards of quality and hygiene for food production.

This manual is divided into five chapters. Chapter one presents a global overview on trading in fruits and vegetables, it shows trends in consumption and considers some of the socio-economic issues involved in the context of post harvest food losses especially during processing and storage. Chapter two describes some concepts of harvesting and post harvest handling, storage and pest control. Chapter three focuses on the importance of the concept of water activities (a_w), and their role in food preservation. Similarly, it describes the concept of intermediate moisture foods (IMF) and the combined methods preservation technology for fruits and vegetables. Chapter four is mostly concerned with fruits, and describes the extension of the intermediate moisture concept to products containing high moisture. The chapter includes the main preliminary operations and formulations. This includes packaging, transport, storage, use of fruits preserved by combined methods and quality control. Chapter five concerns horticultural crops and, in addition to some preliminary operations, describes a number of combined optional treatments such as irradiation, refrigeration, pickling, and packaging, transport and quality control.

Fruits and vegetables represent an important and in many cases an under-appreciated resource which could benefit from better utilisation and exploitation in the rural communities. This manual has therefore been designed as a useful reference book for food producers, traders and processors. Other users include extension agents and rural development practitioners active in the processing and preservation aspects of the food chain.

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HANDLING AND PRESERVATION OF FRUITS AND VEGETABLES BY COMBINED METHODS FOR RURAL AREAS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1 FRUITS AND VEGETABLES: AN OVERVIEW ON SOCIO-ECONOMICAL AND TECHNICAL ISSUES	3
1.1 Trade and global trends: Fruits and vegetables	3
1.2 Traditional consumption	4
1.3 Economic and social impact	4
1.4 Commercial constraints	5
1.5 Post-harvest losses and resource under-utilization in developing countries	6
1.5.1 Food losses after harvesting	6
1.5.2 Food losses due to social and economic issues	7
1.6 Pre-processing to add value	8
1.7 Pre-processing to avoid losses	8
1.8 Alternative processing methods for fruits and vegetables in rural areas	8
1.8.1 Scalding or blanching in hot water	10
1.8.2 Cooling in trays	10
1.8.3 Sulphiting	10
1.8.4 Sun drying and osmotic dehydration	10
1.8.5 Fermentation	11
1.8.6 Storage	14
1.8.7 Sample calculation for adjusting fruit soluble solids and acid contents	16
CHAPTER 2 BASIC HARVEST AND POST-HARVEST HANDLING CONSIDERATIONS FOR FRESH FRUITS AND VEGETABLES	19
2.1 Harvest handling	19
2.1.1 Maturity index for fruits and vegetables	19
2.1.2 Harvesting containers	26
2.1.3 Tools for harvesting	26
2.1.4 Packing in the field and transport to packinghouse	26
2.2 Post-harvest handling	29
2.2.1 Curing of roots, tubers, and bulb crops	29
2.2.2 Operations prior to packaging	30
2.2.3 Packaging	31
2.2.4 Cooling methods and temperatures	33
2.2.5 Storage	35
2.2.6 Pest control and decay	37

CHAPTER 3 GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRESERVATION OF FRUITS AND VEGETABLES 39

3.1	Water Activity (a_w) concept and its role in food preservation	39
3.1.1	a_w concept	39
3.1.2	Microorganisms vs. a_w values	39
3.1.3	Enzymatic and chemical changes related to a_w values	40
3.1.4	Recommended equipment for measuring a_w	41
3.2	Intermediate Moisture Foods (IMF) concept	44
3.2.1	Fruits preserved under IMF concept	45
3.2.2	Advantages and disadvantages of IMF preservation	45
3.3	Combined methods for preservation of fruits and vegetables: a preservation concept	46
3.3.1	Why combined methods?	46
3.3.2	General description of combined methods for fruits and vegetables	46
3.3.3	Recommended substances to reduce a_w in fruits	48
3.3.4	Recommended substances to reduce pH	50
3.3.5	Recommended chemicals to prevent browning	51
3.3.6	Recommended additives to inhibit microorganisms	51
3.3.7	Recommended thermal treatment for food preservation	52

CHAPTER 4 EXTENSION OF THE INTERMEDIATE MOISTURE CONCEPT TO HIGH MOISTURE PRODUCTS 55

4.1	Preliminary operations	56
4.2	Desired a_w and syrup formulation	57
4.2.1	Calculus required	57
4.2.2	Water content vs. a_w relationship	59
4.3	Example of application	60
4.4	Packaging methods for minimally processed products	74
4.4.1	Packaging with small units	74
4.4.2	Transporting the package	74
4.4.3	Loading packaging units	74
4.4.4	Vacuum and modified atmosphere packaging	74
4.5	Transport, storage and use of fruits preserved by combined methods	75
4.5.1	Open vs. refrigerated vehicles	75
4.5.2	Unloading	75
4.5.3	Storage temperature vs. shelf life	75
4.5.4	Repackaging considerations	79
4.5.5	Syrup reconstitution and utilization	79
4.5.6	Optimal utilization of final products	79
4.6	Quality control	79
4.6.1	Recommended microbiological tests	79
4.6.2	Nutritional changes	80
4.6.3	Changes in sensory attributes and acceptability	80

CHAPTER 5 PROCEDURES FOR VEGETABLES PRESERVED BY COMBINED METHODS	83
5.1 Preliminary operations	83
5.2 Combined optional treatments	86
5.2.1 Irradiation	86
5.2.2 Refrigeration	87
5.2.3 Modified atmosphere	88
5.2.4 Pickling	89
5.2.5 Fermentation	90
5.3 Packaging methods	91
5.3.1 Plastic containers and bags	91
5.3.2 Vacuum packaging	91
5.3.3 Modified atmosphere packaging	91
5.4 Transport, storage and use of vegetables preserved by combined methods	92
5.4.1 Open vs. refrigerated vehicles	92
5.4.2 Unloading	92
5.4.3 Storage temperature vs. shelf life	93
5.4.4 Repackaging considerations	93
5.4.5 Optimal utilization of the final products	93
5.5 Quality control	95
5.5.1 Recommended microbiological tests	95
5.5.2 Nutritional changes	95
5.5.3 Changes in sensory attributes and acceptability	95
References	97
Glossary	99

INTRODUCTION

This manual presents information related to the processing of fruits and vegetables by combined methods. It is intended to serve as a guide to farmers and processors of fruits and vegetables in rural and village areas. Information concerning the trade and production of fruits and vegetables in different countries is provided, as well as information on the processing of fruit and vegetable products. The combination of factors such as water activity (a_w), pH, redox potential, temperature, and incorporation of additives in preserving fruits and vegetables is important, and all play a crucial role in improving the shelf life of fresh and processed commodities.

The increasing popularity of minimally processed fruits and vegetables has resulted in greater health benefits. Furthermore, the ongoing trend has been to eat out and to consume ready-to-eat foods (Alzamora et al., 2000). With this increasing demand for ready-to-eat, fresh, minimally processed foods, including processed fruits and vegetables preserved by relatively mild techniques, new ecology routes for microbial growth have emerged. In order to minimize the loss of quality and to control microbial growth, and thus ensure product safety and convenience, a hurdle approach appears to be the best method (Alzamora et al., 2000). According to Alzamora et al. (2000), hurdle technology can be applied several ways in the design of preservation systems for minimally processed foods at various stages of the food chain:

- As a “backup” measure for existing minimally processed products with short shelf life, to diminish microbial pathogenic risk and/or increase shelf life (i.e., use of natural antimicrobials or other stress factors, in addition to refrigeration).
- As an important tool for improving the quality of long shelf life products without diminishing their microbial stability/safety (i.e., use of heat coadjuvants to reduce the severity of thermal treatments).
- As a synergist. According to Leistner (1994), in food preserved by hurdle technology, the possibility exists that different hurdles in a food will not just have an additive effect on stability, but could act synergistically. A synergist effect could work if the hurdle in a food hits different targets (e.g., cell membrane, DNA, enzyme systems, pH, a_w , Eh) within the microbial cell, and thus disturbs the homeostasis of the microorganisms present in several aspects. Therefore, employing different hurdles in the preservation of a particular food should be an advantage, because microbial stability could be achieved with a combination of gentle hurdles. In practical terms, this could mean that it is more effective to use different preservatives in small amounts in a food than only one preservative in large amounts, because different preservatives might hit different targets within the bacterial cell, and thus act synergistically (Leistner, 1994).

During the last decade, minimally processed high moisture fruit products (HMFP), which are ambient stable (with $a_w > 0.93$), have been developed in seven Latin American countries, under the leadership of Argentina, Mexico, and Venezuela. This novel technology was successfully applied to peach halves, pineapple slices, mango slices and purée, papaya slices, chicozapote slices, banana purée, plum, passion fruit, tamarind, whole figs, strawberries, and pomalaca (Alzamora et al., 1995). The methodology employed was based on combinations of mild heat treatments, such as blanching for 1-3 minutes with saturated steam, slightly reducing the a_w (0.98-0.93) by addition of glucose or sucrose, lowering the pH (4.1-3.0) by addition of

citric or phosphoric acid, and adding antimicrobials (1000 ppm of potassium sorbate or sodium benzoate, as well as 150 ppm of sodium sulphite or sodium bisulphite) to the product syrup. During storage of HMFP, the sorbate and sulphite levels decreased, as well as a_w levels, due to hydrolysis of glucose (Alzamora et al., 1995).

The work presented in this manual demonstrates at which stage of maturity a fruit or vegetable should be harvested, and packaged, for optimum storability, marketable life, quality, and all aspects related to final use of fresh and processed products. Some useful examples, figures, and tables concerning the preservation of fruits and vegetables by combined methods are demonstrated

This book also summarizes the basic principles of harvest and post-harvest handling and storage of fresh fruits and vegetables.