

Crock Pot/Slow Cooker Tips

Fill level: A crock pot should be at least ½ full to ¾ full for best results to include cooking time.

Lid: Resist the urge to take off the lid. Opening the slow cooker lets heat escape. It takes 20 minutes for the slow cooker to recover which might extend cooking time. Only open it 30 to 45 minutes before the low end of the cooking range to check doneness. Especially avoid opening the lid the first two hours. One can thicken the juices and concentrate flavors by removing the lid and cooking on HIGH for the last half hour of cooking time.

Care for your crock: The ceramic insert in a slow cooker can crack if exposed to abrupt temperature shifts. In other words, don't place a hot ceramic insert directly on a cold counter; put down a dishtowel first. The same goes for using a filled insert you've stowed overnight in the refrigerator: Never place your stoneware (whether it has been refrigerated or is at room temperature) in a pre-heated slow cooker base-let the crock warm up with the base.

Layer wisely: For even cooking, cut food into uniform-size pieces. Place firm, slow-cooking root vegetables like potatoes and carrots at the bottom of the crock. Foods cooked on the bottom of the slow cooker cook faster and will be moister because they are immersed in the simmering liquid. Add tender vegetables like tomatoes, mushrooms and zucchini during the last 45 minutes of cooking time so they don't overcook.

Heat level: A general rule of thumb is that cooking on the low setting (170 degrees F for most models) takes about twice as long as cooking on high (280 degrees F on most models).

Spices:

Dried herbs lose their flavor after a few hours of slow cooking and leave the dish bland. Fresh leafy versions like basil and cilantro fall apart. Some recommend that spices may need to be increased because of the lack of liquid evaporation, including rosemary, lemon, and garlic.

Recommendations:

Add at the beginning: Whole leaf dried spices like Bay Leaves. Chili powder, black pepper, paprika, cinnamon, cumin, cardamom and coriander, "many of which can taste harsh and bitter when uncooked but become sublime when cooked over time."¹ Fresh garlic. Also 3 of "the woodies: rosemary, sage and thyme."²

Add at the end:

All other spices *including* Cayenne pepper, vegetables that add flavor like onion, and condiments like hot sauce, chili sauce, liquid smoke or oriental sauces, should be added just an hour before serving so that the flavors have time to blend but will not dissipate. When cooking beans, add any salt at the end or the beans will not soften properly.

Sautéing vegetables, such as carrots and onions, prior to slow cooking softens them and **improves the flavor** of the meal.

Converting recipes for a slow cooker: Because the liquid will not evaporate like during other cooking, if you're adapting a standard recipe, it is best to reduce the liquid by roughly a third.

If a dish usually takes:

- 15 - 30 mins, cook it for 1 - 2 hours on High or 4 - 6 hours on Low
- 30 mins - 1 hour, cook it for 2 - 3 hours on High or 5 - 7 hours on Low
- 1 - 2 hours, cook it for 3 - 4 hours on High or 6 - 8 hours on Low
- 2 - 4 hours, cook it for 4 - 6 hours on High or 8 - 12 hours on Low

¹ <http://www.oprah.com/food/Cooking-With-a-Crock-Pot-Crock-Pot-Ingredients-Leigh-Newman>

² Michele Scicolone, author of *The Italian Slow Cooker* and *The French Slow Cooker* From <http://www.oprah.com/food/Cooking-With-a-Crock-Pot-Crock-Pot-Ingredients-Leigh-Newman>