If you have lots of ripe or even green tomatoes and don't know what to do with them, ask Kathleen Awe, a master preserver and gardener with the University of Wisconsin-Extension who teaches classes on her specialties.

Awe learned to can from a neighbor 40 years ago — the first summer she and her husband Jim made a garden on the 14-acre Town of Cedarburg property that was an open field when they bought it.

"She showed me how to can applesauce," Awe said. "I branched out from there."

Awe's cellar is already filled with jars of tomatoes, pickles, corn relish, beets, salsa, hot peppers, peaches, pears, Italian sauce, herb jellies , vinegars and antipasto. The antipasto recipe came from her grandmother, who was born in Sicily and brought it with her to America.

Awe gives most of her canned items away as gifts.

The current focus on growing food at home and in community gardens has sparked an interest in preserving the harvest, she said.

At a recent class, Awe said the room was filled with young women and a few men who had questions about canning.

One of the questions was what causes pickles to be soft.

"Cutting off the blossom end of cucumbers is supposed to keep them crisp. I put a grape leaf in with my pickles to prevent them getting soft," Awe said.

She took a UW-Extension master preserver course last year in Appleton.

"UW-Extension wants canning to be done safely," Awe said. "I took the class because I would like to teach people to can. It's fun. A lot of rules for canning have changed."

What hasn't changed, she said, is the satisfaction of seeing the counter filled with jars of produce.

“When you’re done, it’s so rewarding to sit and see those beautiful, colorful jars,” Awe said.

“Canning can be long, tedious and messy, but it’s really a lot of fun to do with someone else.”

Awe’s friends and family members have their specialities.

“When my friend Lois comes to make pickles, we have zucchini bread for a snack,” Awe said. “Lois is the best pickle packer.

“I make antipasto with my sister, and everyone in the family gets a jar.”

Another sister likes corn relish and helps with that process.

Awe’s husband is building a summer kitchen where she can do her canning. The kitchen will also house a wood-fired pizza oven and grill.

Their property is on a glacial esker filled with clay and rocks left when the glacier receded. The house sits on the top of a hill, but the property then dips down to a valley.

The Awes planted every tree and turned the property surrounding the house into a series of raised garden beds bordered with rocks from their or a neighbor’s land.

The front yard slope is a naturalized prairie. The gardens bloom from March through October.

Awe pointed out fall crocuses, bottle gentian, turtle head and other plants that had just bloomed.

“The early flowers and late flowers are more sparse. You have to visit them,” she said.

A pond that channels water from a stream through the property has stepping stones to a gazebo, where the Awes eat most of their meals in summer.

The pond was built by Peter Hurth, who owned Ponds Plus in Saukville. The rocks removed for the pond were used to replace rotting railroad ties that had been used for raised beds in the vegetable garden. Hurth placed those large rocks, but Jim Awe made the other beds, laying hundreds of rocks to border flower plots with winding paths between them.

He also built the gazebo, greenhouse and fences.

“He doesn’t do the gardening, but he does the hardscaping, which makes the garden,” Awe said. “He likes to expand the gardens because then he doesn’t have to cut grass.”

Her vegetable garden is still lush with second crops of many vegetables, including lettuce, arugula and green beans, as well as fall squash and pumpkins.

“I always plant pumpkin seeds with children. Then they can come and pick their pumpkin,”

Awe said.

The first year Awe had a vegetable garden, she planted a row of zucchini plants and was inundated with the vegetable that ended up in almost everything she made.

“I started to read about gardening after that,” she said. “I read ‘Crockett’s Victory Garden’ and got a subscription to Organic Gardening. When I started gardening, UW-Extension didn’t have a good home gardening program. It focused more on farmers.”

Awe was at the forefront of the master gardener program in Ozaukee County and is now helping to establish a program in Washington County.

“I got into canning because of the garden,” Awe said. “Some years you make more of one thing because you have so much, and other years, you don’t make any because there was a crop failure.

“If you enjoy working with produce, it’s so rewarding. You have an end product that is so delightful and tastes good.

“Sometimes I pull out a beautiful tomato or pickle and I don’t want to can it. It’s too pretty. I give it as a gift instead.”

This week's Recipe page includes some of Awe’s favorite canning recipes.

Image Information: Kathleen Awe held a basket full of produce she canned. Photo by Sam Arendt