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The Solar Funnel Cooker

How to Make and Use The Brigham Young University Solar Cooker/Cooler

by Steven E. Jones, Professor of Physics at Brigham Young University (BYU), with Colter Paulson, Jason Chesley, Jacob Fugal, Derek Hullinger, Jamie Winterton, Jeannette Lawler, and Seth, David, Nathan, and Danelle Jones.

Introduction

A few years ago, I woke up to the fact that half of the people in the world must burn wood or dried dung in order to cook their food. It came as quite a shock to me, especially as I learned of the illnesses caused by breathing smoke day in and day out, and the environmental impacts of deforestation - not to mention the time spent by people (mostly women) gathering sticks and dung to cook their food. And yet, many of these billions of people live near the equator, where sunshine is abundant and free. So.....

As a University Professor of Physics with a background in energy usage, I set out to develop a means of cooking food and sterilising water using the energy freely available from the sun. First, I looked at existing methods.

The parabolic cooker involves a reflective dish which concentrates sunlight to a point where the food is cooked. This approach is very dangerous since the sun's energy is focused to a point which is very hot, but which cannot be seen. (Brigham Young University students and I built one which will set paper on fire in about 3 seconds!). I learned that an altruistic group had offered reflecting parabolas to the people living at the Altiplano in Bolivia. But more than once these parabolas had been stored next to a shed -- and the passing sun set the sheds on fire! The people did not want these dangerous, expensive devices, even though the Altiplano region has been stripped of fuel wood.

The box cooker: Is basically an insulated box with a glass or plastic lid, often with a reflecting lid to direct sunlight into the box. Light enters through the top glass (or plastic), to slowly heat up the box. The problems with this design are that energy enters only through the top, while heat is escaping through all of the other sides, which have a tendency to draw heat away from the food. When the box is opened to put food in or take it out, some of the heat escapes and is lost. Also, effective box cookers tend to be more complicated to build than the funnel cooker.

While studying this problem, I thought again and again of the great need for a safe, inexpensive yet effective solar cooker. It finally came to me at Christmastime a few years ago, a sort of hybrid between the parabola and the box cooker. It looks like a large, deep funnel, and incorporates what I believe are the best features of both the parabolic cooker and the box cooker.

The first reflector was made at my home out of aluminium foil glued on to cardboard, then this was curved to form a reflective funnel. My children and I figured out a way to make a large cardboard funnel easily. (I'll tell you exactly how to do this later on.)

The Solar Funnel Cooker is safe and low cost, easy to make, yet very effective in capturing the sun's energy for cooking and pasteurising water -> Eureka!

Later, I did extensive tests with students (including reflectivity tests) and found that aluminised Mylar was good too, but relatively expensive and rather hard to come by in large sheets. Besides, cardboard is found throughout the world and is inexpensive, and aluminium foil is also easy to come by. Also, individuals can make their own solar cookers easily, or start a cottage-industry to manufacture them for others.

Prototypes of the Solar Funnel Cooker were tested in Bolivia, and outperformed an expensive solar box cooker and a “Solar Coolkit” while costing much less then either. Brigham Young University submitted a patent application, mainly to insure that no company would prevent wide distribution of the Solar Funnel Cooker. Brigham Young University makes no profit from the invention. (I later learned that a few people had had a similar idea, but with methods differing from those developed and shown here). So now I'm trying to get the word out so that the invention can be used to capture the free energy coming from the sun - for camping and for emergencies, yes, but also for every day cooking where electricity is not available and where even fuel wood is getting scarce.

How it Works

The reflector is shaped like a giant funnel, and lined with aluminium foil. (Easy to follow instructions will be given soon). This funnel is rather like the parabolic cooker, except that the sunlight is concentrated along a line (not a point) at the bottom of the funnel. You can put your hand up the bottom of the funnel and feel the sun's heat, but it will not burn you.

Next, we paint a jar black on the outside, to collect heat, and place this at the bottom of the funnel. Or a black pot with a lid can be used. The black vessel gets hot, quickly, but not quite hot enough to cook with. We need some way to build up the heat without letting the outside air cool it. So, I put a cheap plastic bag around the jar -- and, the solar funnel cooker was born! The plastic bag, available in grocery stores as a "poultry bag", replaces the cumbersome and expensive box and glass lid of solar box ovens. You can use the plastic bags used in American stores to put groceries in, as long as they let a lot of sunlight pass. (Dark- coloured bags will not do).

I recently tested a bag used for fruits and vegetables, nearly transparent and available free at American grocery stores, that works great. This is stamped "HDPE" for high-density polyethylene on the bag (ordinary polyethylene melts too easily). A block of wood is placed under the jar to help hold the heat in. (Any insulator, such as a hot pad or rope or even sticks, will also work).

A friend of mine who is also a Physics Professor did not believe I could actually boil water with the thing. So I showed him that with this new "solar funnel cooker" I was able to boil water in Utah in the middle of winter! I laid the funnel on its side since it was winter and pointed a large funnel towards the sun to the south. I also had to suspend the black cooking vessel -- rather than placing it on a wooden block. This allows the weaker sun rays to strike the entire surface of the vessel.

Of course, the Solar Funnel works much better outside of winter days, that is, when the UV index is 7 or greater. Most other solar cookers will not cook in the winter in northern areas (or south of about 35 degrees, either).

I thought that a pressure cooker would be great. But the prices in stores were way too high for me. Wait, how about a canning jar? These little beauties are designed to relieve pressure through the lid -- a nice pressure cooker. And cooking time is cut in half for each 10ºC we raise the temperature (Professor Lee Hansen, private communication). I used one of my wife's wide-mouth canning jars, spray-painted (flat) black on the outside, and it worked great. Food cooks faster when you use a simple canning jar as a pressure cooker. However, you can also put a black pot in the plastic bag instead if you want. But don't use a sealed container with no pressure release like a mayonnaise jar -- it can break as the steam builds up (I've done it)!

How to Build Your Own Solar Funnel Cooker

What You will Need for the Funnel Cooker:

- A piece of flat cardboard, about 2 feet wide by 4 feet long. (The length should be just twice the width. The bigger, the better).
- Ordinary aluminium foil.
- A glue such as white glue (like Elmer's glue), and water to mix with it 50-50. Also, a brush to apply the glue to the cardboard (or a cloth or paper towel will do). Or, some may wish to use a cheap "spray adhesive" available in spray cans. You can also use flour paste.

Three wire brads - or small nuts and bolts, or string to hold the funnel together.

For a cooking vessel, I recommend a canning jar ("Ball" wide-mouth quart jars work fine for me; the rubber ring on the lid is less likely to melt than for other jars I've found. A two-quart canning jar is available and works fine for larger quantities of food, although the cooking is somewhat slower).

The cooking jar (or vessel) should be spray-painted black on the outside. I find that a cheap flat-black spray paint works just fine. Scrape off a vertical stripe so that you have a clear glass "window" to look into the vessel, to check the food or water for boiling.

A block of wood is used as an insulator under the jar. I use a piece of 2" x 4" board which is cut into a square nominally 4" x 4" by about 2" thick. (100 mm square x 50 mm thick). One square piece of wood makes a great insulator.

A plastic bag is used to go around the cooking-jar and block of wood, to provide a green-house effect. Suggestions:

- Reynolds™ Oven Bag, Regular Size works great: transparent and won't melt. (Cost about 25 cents each in U.S. grocery stores.)

- Any nearly-transparent HDPE bag (High-density Polyethylene). Look for "HDPE" stamped on the bag. I've tested HDPE bags which I picked up for free at my grocery store, used for holding vegetables and fruits. These are thin, but very inexpensive. Tested side-by-side with an oven bag in two solar funnels, the HDPE bag worked just as well! **Caution:** we have found that some HDPE bags will melt should they contact the hot cooking vessel. For this reason, we recommend using the oven-safe plastic bag wherever possible.

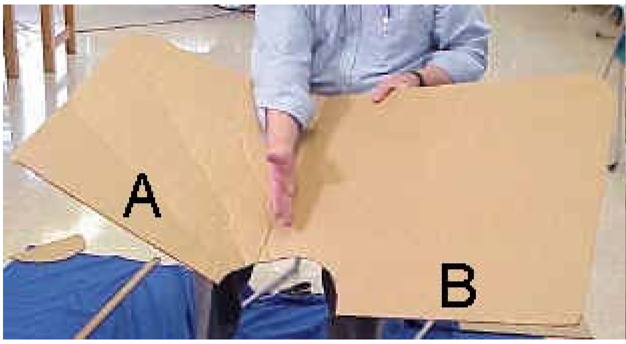
- An idea attributed to Roger Bernard and applied now to the BYU Funnel Cooker: place a pot (having a blackened bottom and sides) in a glass bowl, and cover with a lid. Try for a tight fit around the bottom to keep hot air trapped inside. The metal pot or bowl should be supported around the rim only, with an air space all around the bottom (where the sunlight strikes it). Put a blackened lid on top of the pot. Then simply place this pot-in-bowl down in the bottom of the funnel - no plastic bag is needed! This clever method also allows the cook to simply remove the lid to check the food and to stir. I like this idea - it makes the solar cooker a lot like cooking over a fire. See Photographs for further details.

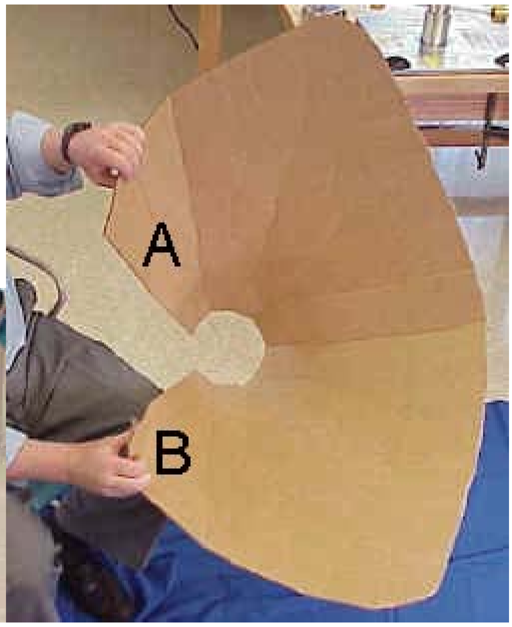
Construction Steps

Cut a Half-circle out of the Cardboard

Cut a half circle out of the cardboard, along the bottom as shown below. When the funnel is formed, this becomes a full-circle and should be wide enough to go around your cooking pot. So for a 7" diameter cooking pot, the radius of the half-circle is 7". For a quart canning jar such as I use, I cut a 5" radius half-circle out of the cardboard.

Form the Funnel



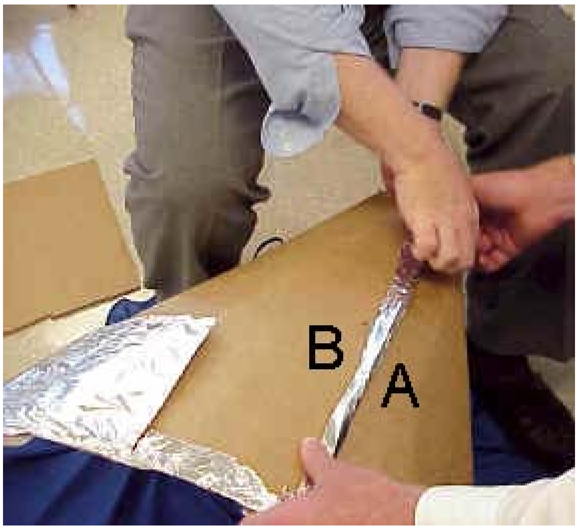


To form the funnel, you will bring side A towards side B, as shown in the figure. The aluminium foil must go on the INSIDE of the funnel. Do this slowly, helping the cardboard to the shape of a funnel by using one hand to form creases that radiate out from the half-circle. Work your way around the funnel, bending it in stages to form the funnel shape, until the two sides overlap and the half-circle forms a complete circle. The aluminium foil will go on the INSIDE of funnel. Open the funnel and lay it flat, "inside up", in preparation for the next step.

Glue Foil to Cardboard

Apply glue or adhesive to the top (inner) surface of the cardboard, then quickly apply the aluminium foil on top of the glue, to affix the foil to the cardboard. Make sure the shiniest side of the foil is on top, since this becomes your reflective surface in the Funnel. I like to put just enough glue for one width of foil, so that the glue stays moist while the foil is applied. I also overlap strips of foil by about 1" (or 2 cm). Try to smooth out the aluminium foil as much as you reasonably can, but small wrinkles won't make much difference. If cardboard is not available, one can simply dig a funnel-shaped hole in the ground and line it with a reflector, to make a fixed solar cooker for use at mid-day.

Join side A to side B to keep the funnel together.



The easiest way to do this is to punch three holes in the cardboard that line up on side A and side B (see figure). Then put a metal brad through each hole and fasten by pulling apart the metal tines. Or you can use a nut-and-bolt to secure the two sides (A & B) together.

Be creative here with what you have available. For example, by putting two holes about a thumb-width apart, you can put a string, twine, small rope, wire or twist-tie in one hole and out the other, and tie together.

When A and B are connected together, you will have a "funnel with two wings". The wings could be cut off, but these help to gather more sunlight, so I leave them on.

Tape or glue a piece of aluminium foil across the hole at the bottom of the funnel, with shiny side in.

This completes assembly of your solar funnel cooker.

For stability, place the funnel inside a cardboard or other box to provide support. For long-term applications, one may wish to dig a hole in the ground to hold the Funnel against strong winds.

Final Steps

At this stage, you are ready to put food items or water into the cooking vessel or jar, and put the lid on securely. (See instructions on food cooking times, to follow).

Place a wooden block in the INSIDE bottom of the cooking bag. I use a piece of 2" x 4" board which is cut into a square nominally 4" x 4" by 2" thick. Then place the cooking vessel containing the food or water on top of the wooden block, inside the bag.

Next, gather the top of the bag in your fingers and ***blow air into the bag, to inflate it***. This will form a small "greenhouse" around the cooking vessel, to trap much of the heat inside. Close off the bag with a tight twist tie or wire. Important: the bag should not touch the sides or lid of the cooking vessel. The bag may be called a "convection shield," slowing convection-cooling due to air currents.

Place the entire bag and its contents inside the funnel near the bottom as shown in the Photographs.

Place the Solar Funnel Cooker so that it Faces the Sun

Remember: Sunlight can hurt the eyes: so please wear sunglasses when using a Solar Cooker! The Funnel Cooker is designed so that the hot region is deep down inside the funnel, out of harm's way.

Put the Solar Funnel Cooker in the sun pointing towards the sun, so that it captures as much sunlight as possible. The design of the funnel allows it to collect solar energy for about an hour without needing to be re-positioned. For longer cooking times, readjust the position of the funnel to follow the sun's path.

In the Northern Hemisphere, it helps to put the Solar Funnel Cooker in front of a south-facing wall or window as this reflects additional sunlight into the funnel. A reflective wall is most important in locations farther from the equator and in winter. In the Southern Hemisphere, put the Solar Funnel Cooker in front of a North-facing wall or window to reflect additional sunlight into your cooker.

After Cooking

Remember that the cooking vessel will be very hot: so use cooking pads or gloves when handling it! If you are heating water in a canning jar, you may notice that the water is boiling when the lid is first removed - it gets very hot!

Open the plastic cooking bag by removing the twist-tie. Using gloves or a thick cloth, lift the vessel out of the bag and place it on the ground or table. Carefully open the vessel and check the food, to make sure it has finished cooking. Let the hot food cool before eating.

Helpful Hints

Avoid leaving fingerprints and smudges on the inside surface of the cooker. Keep the inner surface clean and shiny by wiping occasionally with a wet towel. This will keep the Solar Funnel Cooker working at its best.

If your funnel gets out-of-round, it can be put back into a circular shape by attaching a rope or string between opposite sides which need to be brought closer together.

For long-term applications, a hole in the ground will hold the Funnel Cooker securely against winds. Bring the funnel inside or cover it during rain storms.

The lids can be used over and over. We have had some trouble with the rubber on some new canning-jar lids becoming soft and "sticky." "Ball canning lids" do not usually have this problem. Running new lids through very hot water before the first use seems to help. The lids can be used over and over if they are not bent too badly when opened (pry off lid carefully).

The jar can be suspended near the bottom of the funnel using fishing line or string (etc.), instead of placing the jar on a block of wood. A plastic bag is placed around the jar with air puffed inside, as usual, to trap the heat. The suspension method allows sunlight to strike all surfaces of the jar, all around, so that heats faster and more evenly. This suspension method is crucial for use in winter months.

Adjust the funnel to put as much sunlight onto the cooking jar as possible. Look at the jar to check where the sunlight is hitting, and to be sure the bottom is not in the shadows. For long cooking times (over about an hour), readjust the position of the funnel to follow the sun's path. During winter months, when the sun is low on the horizon (e.g., in North America), it is helpful to lay the funnel on its side, facing the sun.

Tests in Utah

I have personally used the Solar Funnel Cooker to cook lunches over many weeks. My favourite foods to cook are potatoes (cut into logs or slices) and carrot slices. Vegetables cook slowly in their own juices and taste delicious. I also make rice, melted cheese sandwiches, and even bread in the Solar Funnel Cooker. I usually put the food out around 11:30 and let it cook until 12:45 or 1 pm, just to be sure that it has time to cook. I've never had any food burn in this cooker.

I have also cooked food in the mountains, at an altitude of around 8,300 feet. If anything, the food cooked faster there - the sunlight passes through less atmosphere at high altitudes.

I find that people are surprised that the sun alone can actually cook food. And they are further pleasantly surprised at the rich flavours in the foods which cook slowly in the sun. This inexpensive device does it!

Students at Brigham Young University have performed numerous tests on the Solar Funnel Cooker along with other cookers. We have consistently found much faster cooking using the Solar Funnel Cooker.

The efficiency/cost ratio is higher than any other solar cooking device we have found to date. Mr. Hullinger also performed studies of transmissivity, reflectivity and absorptivity of alternate materials which could be used in the Solar Funnel Cooker. While there are better materials, such as solar-selective absorbers, our goal has been to keep the cost of the Solar Cooker as low as possible, while maintaining safety as a first priority.

Tests in Bolivia

The BYU Benson Institute organised tests between the Solar Funnel Cooker and the "old-fashioned" solar box oven. The solar box oven cost about $70 and was made mostly of cardboard. It took nearly two hours just to reach water pasteurisation temperature. The Bolivian report notes that "food gets cold every time the pots are taken from and into the oven." The solar box oven failed even to cook boiled eggs. (More expensive box cookers would hopefully work better.)

An aluminised-mylar Solar Funnel Cooker was also tested in Bolivia, during the Bolivian winter. Water pasteurisation temperature was reached in 50 minutes, boiled eggs cooked in 70 minutes, and rice cooked in 75 minutes. The Bolivian people were pleased by the performance. So were we! (La Paz, Bolivia, August, 1996).

I also donated two dozen solar funnel cookers for people in Guatemala. These were taken there by a group of doctors going there for humanitarian service. The people there also liked the idea of cooking with the sun's free energy. For an aluminised-Mylar Solar Funnel Cooker kit, please contact CRM (licensed manufacturer) at +1 (801) 292-9210.

Water and Milk Pasteurisation

Contaminated drinking water or milk kills thousands of people each day, especially children. The World Health Organisation reports that 80% of illnesses in the world are spread through contaminated water. Studies show that heating water to about 65º - 70º C (150º F) is sufficient to kill coliform bacteria, rotaviruses, enteroviruses and even Giardia. This is called pasteurisation.

Pasteurisation depends on how hot and how long water is heated. But how do you know if the water got hot enough? You could use a thermometer, but this would add to the cost, of course. When steam leaves the canning jar (with lid on tight) and forms "dew" on the inside of the cooking bag, then the water is probably pasteurised to drink. (The goal is to heat to 160º Fahrenheit for at least six minutes.) With a stripe of black paint scraped off the jar, one can look through the bag and into the jar and see when the water is boiling - then it is safe for sure.

Think of all the lives that can be saved simply by pasteurising water using a simple Solar Cooker!

Safety

Safety was my first concern in designing the Solar Funnel Cooker, then came low cost and effectiveness. But any time you have heat you need to take some precautions.

- The cooking vessel (jar) is going to get hot, otherwise the food inside it won't cook. Let the jar cool a bit before opening. Handle only with gloves or tongs.

- Always wear dark glasses to protect from the sun's rays. We naturally squint, but sunglasses are important.
- Keep the plastic bag away from children and away from nose and mouth to avoid any possibility of suffocation.

Cooking with the Solar Funnel Cooker

What do you cook in a crock pot or moderate-temperature oven? The same foods will cook about the same in the Solar Funnel Cooker - without burning. The charts below give approximate summer cooking times.

The solar cooker works best when the UV index is 7 or higher (Sun high overhead, few clouds).

Cooking times are approximate. Increase cooking times for partly-cloudy days, sun not overhead (e.g., wintertime) or for more than about 3 cups of food in the cooking jar.

Stirring is not necessary for most foods. Food generally will not burn in the solar cooker.

Vegetables (Potatoes, carrots, squash, beets, asparagus, etc.)
Preparation: No need to add water if fresh. Cut into slices or "logs" to ensure uniform cooking. Corn will cook fine with or without the cob.
Cooking Time: About 1.5 hours

Cereals and Grains (Rice, wheat, barley, oats, millet, etc.)
Preparation: Mix 2 parts water to every 1 part grain. Amount may vary according to individual taste. Let soak for a few hours for faster cooking. To ensure uniform cooking, shake jar after 50 minutes.
CAUTION: Jar will be hot. Use gloves or cooking pads.
Cooking Time: 1.5-2 hours

Pasta and Dehydrated Soups
Preparation: First heat water to near boiling (50-70 minutes). Then add the pasta or soup mix. Stir or shake, and cook 15 additional minutes.
Cooking Time: 65-85 minutes

Beans
Preparation: Let tough or dry beans soak overnight. Place in cooking jar with water.
Cooking Time: 2-3 hours

Eggs
Preparation: No need to add water. **Note**: If cooked too long, egg whites may darken, but taste remains the same.
Cooking Time: 1-1.5 hours, depending on desired yolk firmness.

Meats (Chicken, beef, and fish)
Preparation: No need to add water. Longer cooking makes the meat more tender.
Cooking Time: Chicken: 1.5 hours cut up or 2.5 hours whole; Beef: 1.5 hours cut up or 2.5-3 hours for larger cuts; Fish: 1-1.5 hours

Baking
Preparation: Times vary based on amount of dough.
Cooking Times: Breads: 1-1.5 hours; Biscuits: 1-1.5 hours; Cookies: 1 hour

Roasted Nuts (Peanuts, almonds, pumpkin seed, etc.)
Preparation: Place in jar. A little vegetable oil may be added if desired.
Cooking Time: About 1.5 hours

MRE's and pre-packaged foods
Preparation: For foods in dark containers, simply place the container in the cooking bag in place of the black cooking jar.
Cooking Times: Cooking time varies with the amount of food and darkness of package.

How to Use the Solar Funnel as a Refrigerator/Cooler

A university student (Jamie Winterton) and I were the first to demonstrate that the Brigham Young University Solar Funnel Cooker can be used - at night - as a refrigerator. Here is how this is done.

The Solar Funnel Cooker is set-up just as you would during sun-light hours, with two exceptions:

1. The funnel is directed at the dark night sky. It should not "see" any buildings or even trees. (The thermal radiation from walls, trees, or even clouds will diminish the cooling effect.).

2. It helps to place 2 (two) bags around the jar instead of just one, with air spaces between the bags and between the inner bag and the jar. HDPE and ordinary polyethylene bags work well, since polyethylene is nearly transparent to infrared radiation, allowing it to escape into the "heat sink" of the dark sky.

During the day, the sun's rays are reflected on to the cooking vessel which becomes hot quickly. At night, heat from the vessel is radiated *outward*, towards empty space, which is very cold indeed (a "heat sink"). As a result, the cooking vessel now becomes a small refrigerator. We routinely achieve cooling of about 20º F (10º C) below ambient air temperature using this remarkably simple scheme.

In September 1999, we placed two funnels out in the evening, with double-bagged jars inside. One jar was on a block of wood and the other was suspended in the funnel using fishing line. The temperature that evening (in Provo, Utah) was 78º F (25.5º C). Using a Radio Shack indoor/outdoor thermometer, a BYU student (Colter Paulson) measured the temperature inside the funnel and outside in the open air. He found that the temperature of the air inside the funnel dropped quickly by about 15º F (8º C), as its heat was radiated upwards in the clear sky. That night, the minimum outdoor air temperature measured was 47.5º F (8.6º C) - but the water in both jars had ICE. I invite others to try this, and please let me know if you get ice at 55 or even 60 degrees outside air temperature (minimum at night). A black PVC container may work even better than a black-painted jar, since PVC is a good infrared radiator - these mattrs are still being studied.

I would like to see the "Funnel Refrigerator" tried in desert climates, especially where freezing temperatures are rarely reached. It should be possible in this way to cheaply make ice for Hutus in Rwanda and for aborigines in Australia, without using any electricity or other modern "tricks." We are in effect bringing some of the cold of space to a little corner on earth. Please let me know how this works for you.

Conclusion: Why We Need Solar Cookers

The BYU Funnel Cooker/Cooler can:

- Cook food without the need for electricity or wood or petroleum or other fuels.
- Pasteurise water for safe drinking, preventing many diseases.
- Save trees and other resources.
- Avoid air pollution and breathing smoke while cooking.
- Use the sun's free energy. A renewable energy source.
- Cook food with little or no stirring, without burning.
- Kill insects in grains.
- Dehydrate fruits, etc.
- Serve as a refrigerator at night, to cool even freeze water.

(Try that without electricity or fuels!)

The burden for gathering the fuel wood and cooking falls mainly on women and children. Joseph Kiai reports :

From Dadaab, Kenya: "Women who can't afford to buy wood start at 4 am to go collecting and return about noon... They do this twice a week to get fuel for cooking... The rapes are averaging one per week."

From Belize: "Many times the women have to go into the forest dragging their small children when they go to look for wood. It is a special hardship for pregnant and nursing mothers to chop and drag trees back to the village... they are exposed to venomous snakes and clouds of mosquitoes."

And the forests are dwindling in many areas. Edwin Dobbs noted in *Audubon Magazine*, Nov. 1992, "The world can choose sunlight or further deforestation, solar cooking or widespread starvation..."

Americans should be prepared for emergencies, incident to power failures. A Mormon pioneer noted in her journal: "We were now following in their trail travelling up the Platte River. Timber was sometimes very scarce and hard to get. We managed to do our cooking with what little we could gather up..." (Eliza R. Snow) Now there's someone who needed a light-weight Solar Cooker!

Here's another reason to use a solar cooker. Many people in developing countries look to see what's being done in America. I'm told that if Americans are using something, then they will want to try it, too. The more people there are cooking with the sun, the more others will want to join in. A good way to spread this technology is to encourage small local industries or families to make these simple yet reliable solar cookers for others at low cost. I've used this cooker for three summers and I enjoy it. Cooking and making ice with the funnel cooker/cooler will permit a significant change in lifestyle. If you think about it, this could help a lot of people. The BYU Solar Funnel Cooker uses the glorious sunshine -- and the energy of the sun is a free gift from God for all to use!

Answers to commonly-asked questions

Will the cooker work in winter (in the United States)?

As the sun moves closer to the southern horizon in the winter, the solar cooker is naturally less effective. A good measure of the solar intensity is the “UV index” which is often reported with the weather. When the ultraviolet or UV index is 7 or above – common in summer months – the solar cooker works very well. In Salt Lake City in October, the UV index was reported to be 3.5 on a sunny day. We were able to boil water in the Solar Funnel Cooker during this time, but we had to suspend the black jar in the funnel so that sunlight struck all sides. (We ran a fishing line under the screw-on lid, and looped the fishing line over a rod above the funnel. As usual, a plastic bag was placed around the jar, and this was closed at the top to let the fishing line out for suspending the jar.)

The solar “minimum” for the northern hemisphere occurs on winter solstice, about December 21st each year. The solar “maximum” occurs six months later, June 21st. Solar cooking works best from about 20th March to 1st October in the north. If people try to cook with the sun for the first time outside of this time window, they should not be discouraged. Try again when the sun is more directly overhead. One may also suspend the jar in the funnel, which will make cooking faster any time of the year.

It is interesting to note that most developing countries are located near the equator where the sun is nearly directly overhead all the time. Solar Cookers will then serve year-round, as long as the sun is shining, for these fortunate people. They may be the first to apply fusion energy (of the sun) on a large scale. They may also accomplish this without the expensive infrastructure of electrical power grids that we take for granted in America.

How do you cook bread in a jar?

I have cooked bread by simply putting dough in the bottom of the jar and placing it in the funnel in the usual way. Rising and baking took place inside the jar in about an hour (during summer). One should put vegetable oil inside the jar before cooking to make removal of the bread easier. I would also suggest that using a 2-quart wide-mouth canning jar instead of a 1-quart jar would make baking a loaf of bread easier.

What is the optimum “opening angle” for the funnel cooker?

A graduate student at Brigham Young University did a calculus calculation to assess the best shape or opening angle for the Solar Funnel. Jeannette Lawler assumed that the best operation would occur when the sun’s rays bounced no more than once before hitting the cooking jar, while keeping the opening angle as large as possible to admit more sunlight. (Some sunlight is lost each time the light reflects from the shiny surface. If the sunlight misses on the first bounce, it can bounce again and again until being absorbed by the black bottle). She set up an approximate equation for this situation, took the calculus derivative with respect to the opening angle and set the derivative equal to zero. Optimising in this way, she found that the optimum opening angle is about 45 degrees, when the funnel is pointed directly towards the sun.

But we don't want to have to "track the sun" by turning the funnel every few minutes. The sun moves (apparently) 360 degrees in 24 hours, or about 15 degrees per hour. So we finally chose a 60-degree opening angle so that the cooker is effective for about 1.2 hours. This turned out to be long enough to cook most vegetables, breads, boil water, etc. with the Solar Funnel Cooker. We also used a laser pointer to simulate sun rays entering the funnel at different angles, and found that the 60-degree cone was quite effective in concentrating the rays at the bottom of the funnel where the cooking jar sits.

For questions regarding the complete Solar Funnel Cooker kit using aluminised Mylar and a jar for the cooking vessel, please contact CRM at +1 (801) 292-9210. Recent updates to this project can be found at http://physics1.byu.edu/jones/rel491/solarbowl.htm.

Tests of the Solar Funnel and Bowl Cookers in 2001

Christopher McMillan and Steven E. Jones
Brigham Young University

Introduction

With an increase in population and a decrease in available fuels such as wood and coal in developing countries, the need for alternative cooking methods has increased. Solar cookers are an alternative to conventional methods such as wood-fires and coal-fires. They provide usable heat for cooking and pasteurising water, without the harmful side effects such as smoke inhalation that non-renewable sources create. In many countries such as Haiti, Bolivia and Kenya, the need for cheap, effective, and safe cooking methods has increased due to poverty and deforestation. Solar cookers are ideal because they rely on the sun's free energy which is abundant in many of the world's poorest countries. Though there are good designs, more testing and improvement is desirable.

There are three areas of comparison that were focused on during the course of the study. The first area of comparison is in the reflective material used. The original material is a mirror-finished aluminium Mylar. Due to the mirror finish, the reflection light is very bright and can be difficult to work over when cooking. An alternative material is a matt-finish Mylar. This material diffuses the sunlight and is not as harsh on the eyes as is the mirrored finish.

The second area of concentration is on the method of containing the air that surrounds the cooker so that the cooker is kept from being cooled by convection currents. A common method is to use a clear plastic oven-safe bag around the cooking vessel. However, this method is rather tedious and awkward to use, and such bags are rarely available in developing countries. Another technique is to use a disk or window make out of a clear plastic or glass. This makes the cooker easier to use.

The third main area of focus is in the cooking containers used. The present cooking vessel for the Solar Funnel Cooker is a black-painted canning jar. This method is also tedious and awkward. The canning jars can be hard to clean, and they can break. Design changes are tested that would allow people to use their own cookware. This too would make the cooker more convenient to use.

The fourth area of testing pitted the wooden block support which we have been using for years against a rabbit-wire support. A rabbit-wire cylinder holds the cooking vessel up off the bottom of the cooker, and allows sunlight to strike essentially all surfaces of the cooking vessel, including the bottom.

The effectiveness of these methods is tested and compared both qualitatively and quantitatively. In addition to acquiring temperature-rise versus time data, we also cooked numerous meals in the solar cookers so as to get hands-on experience with cooking. Several students participated in these cooking tests.

Cooker Designs:

Several solar cooker designs were used during these tests. The Solar Funnel Cooker was the main cooker tested. A Solar CooKit and a bowl-shaped variation of the Solar Funnel Cooker were also tested. Most experiments were comparative tests between the various designs, and the cooker set-up was varied from test to test. The basic design of the Solar Funnel Cooker is a funnel-shaped aluminium Mylar collector. A highly reflective material is necessary to collect and concentrate the sun's rays. The funnel walls are at a 60 degree angle (with respect to the horizontal) since this collects sunlight for a two hour time period without requiring re-orientation to follow the sun.   Due to the way the Mylar sheets are cut and folded, a pair of wings on opposite ends of the funnel is formed. The wings increase the collector size and create an elliptical shape at top. At the tips of the wings, the cooker stands about 20 inches high and has a diameter of about 28 inches. At the top, along the minor axis of the elliptical funnel, the cooker stands about 15 inches high, and has a diameter of about 20 inches. Since the Aluminium Mylar does not support itself well, a nine inch diameter by five inch high bucket is used to support the funnel.

The cooking container primarily tested is a glass canning jar that has been painted flat black. The black paint allows the jar to absorb the sun's rays. The canning jar works well due to the added pressure-cooker effect caused by the rubber ring on the inside of the lid. A black-enamel pot and a black-painted stainless steel canister were also used. We found immediately that raising the vessel off the bottom of the cooker using a rabbit-wire stand provided more rapid and even heating than the wooden block used previously. Placing the jar or pot on a wire stand allows as much reflected light onto the cooking vessel as possible. This allows even the bottom of the cooking container to absorb thermal energy that is reflected off the lower portion of the funnel.

Two methods of closing the cookers off from convection currents were used.   It is important to keep the air that surrounds the container from circulating, thus keeping the cooking container from being cooled by convection currents or breezes. This first method used was to enclose the cooking vessel and wire stand in a clear plastic bag, such as a heat resistant Reynolds Oven Bag. It is important to make sure that the bag is not touching the cooking vessel, so once the vessel is placed into the clear bag, air is blown into the bag and the bag is tied off.   This is the most common method used for solar panel cookers, such as the Solar CooKit, because of the bags' ability to withstand the temperatures attained in these types of cookers. But these bags tear rather easily and they are not readily available in developing countries and must be imported.

The second method of closing off the cooking vessel from convection currents, designed by Dr. Jones, is to place a clear plastic disk down into the funnel above the cooking vessel. The funnel used in the test was a conventional-shaped funnel that was constructed out of thin sheet metal and aluminium-foil lined for better reflectivity. The diameter of this funnel is about 30 inches at the top, and it stands about 16 inches high. The walls also form about a 60 degree angle with respect to the horizontal. This funnel was designed to hold a larger cooking container such as a pot. The diameter of the plastic disk is large enough that the disk does not touch the top of the container. For the experiments that tested this method, a one-sixteenth inch (1.6 mm) thick Lexan disk was used.

Data Collection

To collect the temperatures as a function of time, a Texas Instruments Calculator Based Laboratory (CBL) was used. This portable interface is capable of recording real-time data from multiple channels. The data were downloaded into a graphing calculator, where they can be analysed and graphed immediately. From the calculator, the data can be transferred to a computer spreadsheet such as Microsoft Excel for further analysis. Due to the nature of these experiments and the low cost to purchase the CBL, this is an ideal data collector to use. A graphing calculator was used to program the CBL and to tell it what data to collect, how many points to collect, and the time period between data points collected. Since the CBL does not have any internal programs for data collection, a program must be written into the graphing calculator. There are ready-made programs that can be uploaded into the calculator, or a custom program can be made to fit the needs of the test. The program that the CBL used allowed multiple thermocouples to collect data simultaneously. To ensure that the thermocouples were calibrated against each other, both were run on the same constant temperature sample in very close proximity. Both temperature probes agreed to within $0.21^{O}C$ of each other. For these experiments, this temperature difference was considered to be acceptable.

Procedure

Each experiment was conducted on the campus of Brigham Young University during mid-day, usually between 11:00 am and 2:00 pm to ensure that the sun was close to being directly over-head. This allowed as much sun light as possible to enter the solar collector. Each experiment included several steps, as listed below.

Before each experiment was set up, the volume of the water and the mass of the container were measured and recorded. The heat capacity of the water and the container were also found. The area of the cooker perpendicular to the sun's rays was also measured. To collect temperature data using thermocouple probes, small holes were drilled into the top of the canning jar and stainless steel canister lids. The jar and canister were both painted ultra-flat black to absorb as much of the sun's energy as possible.

On the morning of each test, the designated volume of water was measured out and poured into the cooking vessel. This volume ranged from 0.6 litre for one-quart jars, to 1.2 litters for half-gallon canning jars. For simultaneous testing, the same amount of water was poured into each container. The temperature probes were wired through the holes in the lids of the containers and secured about 13 mm into the water. For comparative tests, the probes were placed the same depth into the water to ensure that the probes did not read different measurements due to depth-related temperature differences within the containers. To enable later analysis; the time, ambient temperature, and solar irradiance were also noted and recorded. These numbers gave a reference point for each test. Each cooker that was to be tested was then completely set up. The temperature probes were secured through the lids, and the jar was placed into the clear oven bag – supported by a wire cage. Each bag was inflated so that no part of the bag touched the sides or top of the cooking container. The cord from the thermocouple to the CBL was passed through the top of the bag, and the bag was tied off with a twist-tie.

The test began once both cookers were completely ready and the CBL had been programmed. Care was taken to block the sun from radiating directly onto the cookers until both were ready to begin. This ensured that the water in both cookers started at very nearly the same temperature. Most tests were set up to collect one data point every four to five minutes, for up to two hours. This allowed the cooker temperatures to reach maxima and then remain at a nearly constant temperature. Once a test was complete, the cooker was disassembled and the data downloaded into the graphing calculator. Though the graphing calculator does allow analysis, a spread sheet such as Microsoft Excel is easier to use. Thus, the data from each test were downloaded from the calculator into Microsoft Excel. The elapsed time (in seconds) and the corresponding temperatures were listed next to each other. A graph of temperature versus time was made, with the Time being the horizontal axis for each test. For comparative tests, the Temperature versus Time data for both cookers was plotted on the same graph. As a reference, a trend-line was fitted to the linear portion of the graph, along with the linear regression and the coefficient of correlation (R2). It is important to have a coefficient of correlation close to one, as this is how close the linear regression fits the data. In a separate column, the temperatures were again listed, however only from 30^{O}C to 70^{O}C. The change in temperature for every ten or twelve minutes was found and logged next to the temperature column. The power output (in Watts) of each cooker could then be calculated.

To calculate the power output of the cookers for each specific test, the mass of the water and of the container were both measured. Though the thermal energy content of the container was relatively small compared to that of water (due to the large heat capacity of water), it was important to add it into the calculation. Also, since several different containers were compared, the energy content of the container was important. The power is found by:

$$Q_{(out)} = Q_{(water)} + Q_{(container)}$$

$$Q_{(out)} = (m_w c_w + m_c c_c)\Delta T$$

$$Power_{(out)} = \frac{Q_{(out)}}{\Delta t}$$

The power is found in Watts. A power output for each change in temperature for the time interval is calculated and logged next to the T column. Since there are uncertainties in all of the measurements, it is important to include the error in each power output. To do this, the error in the water's and container's measurements is taken into consideration. The error is found by:

$$\pm \Delta P = \sqrt{(\frac{\partial P}{\partial m_w}\Delta m_w)^2 + (\frac{\partial P}{\partial m_c}\Delta m_c)^2 + (\frac{\partial P}{\partial t}\Delta t)_w^2 + (\frac{\partial P}{\partial t}\Delta t)_c^2 + 2(\frac{\partial P}{\partial T}\Delta T)_w^2 + 2(\frac{\partial P}{\partial T}\Delta T)_c^2}$$

Where ±dP is the total error in the calculated error, dmw and dmc are the error in the mass of the water and container respectively,)Tp is the error in the temperature difference, and)t is the error in the time interval.

This simplifies to:

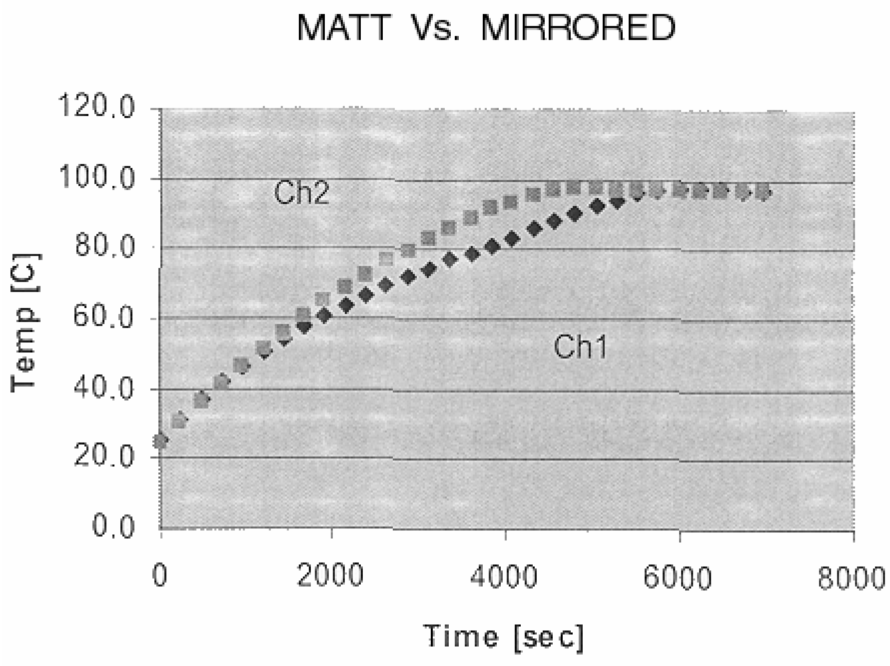
$$\pm \Delta P = \sqrt{[(\frac{c_w \Delta T}{t}\Delta m_w)^2 + (\frac{c_c \Delta T}{t}\Delta m_c)^2 + (\frac{m_w c_w \Delta T}{t^2}\Delta t)^2 + (\frac{m_c c_c \Delta T}{t^2}\Delta t)^2 + 2(\frac{m_w c_w}{t}\Delta T_p)^2 + 2(\frac{m_c c_c}{t}\Delta T_p)^2]}$$

The error was found only for the average change in temperature, rather than for each individual temperature measurement. Since the power output is dependant on the amount of energy coming in from the sun, the cooker efficiency is a good factor to calculate. To find the efficiency, the total amount of local solar radiation must be known. This should be given in watts per square metre, so that the input wattage can be found. To find the power coming in, the area of the cooker perpendicular to the sun's rays was multiplied by the solar radiation to give the amount of power that was being collected by the cooker. Since the Solar Funnel is able to be kept on track with the sun, and since the tests were done during mid-day, it was not necessary to calculate any angles. The efficiency is simply the power output divided by the power input. The solar radiation for each test was supplied by the Department of Physics and Astronomy weather station at Brigham Young University in Provo, UT, where the tests took place.

Results:

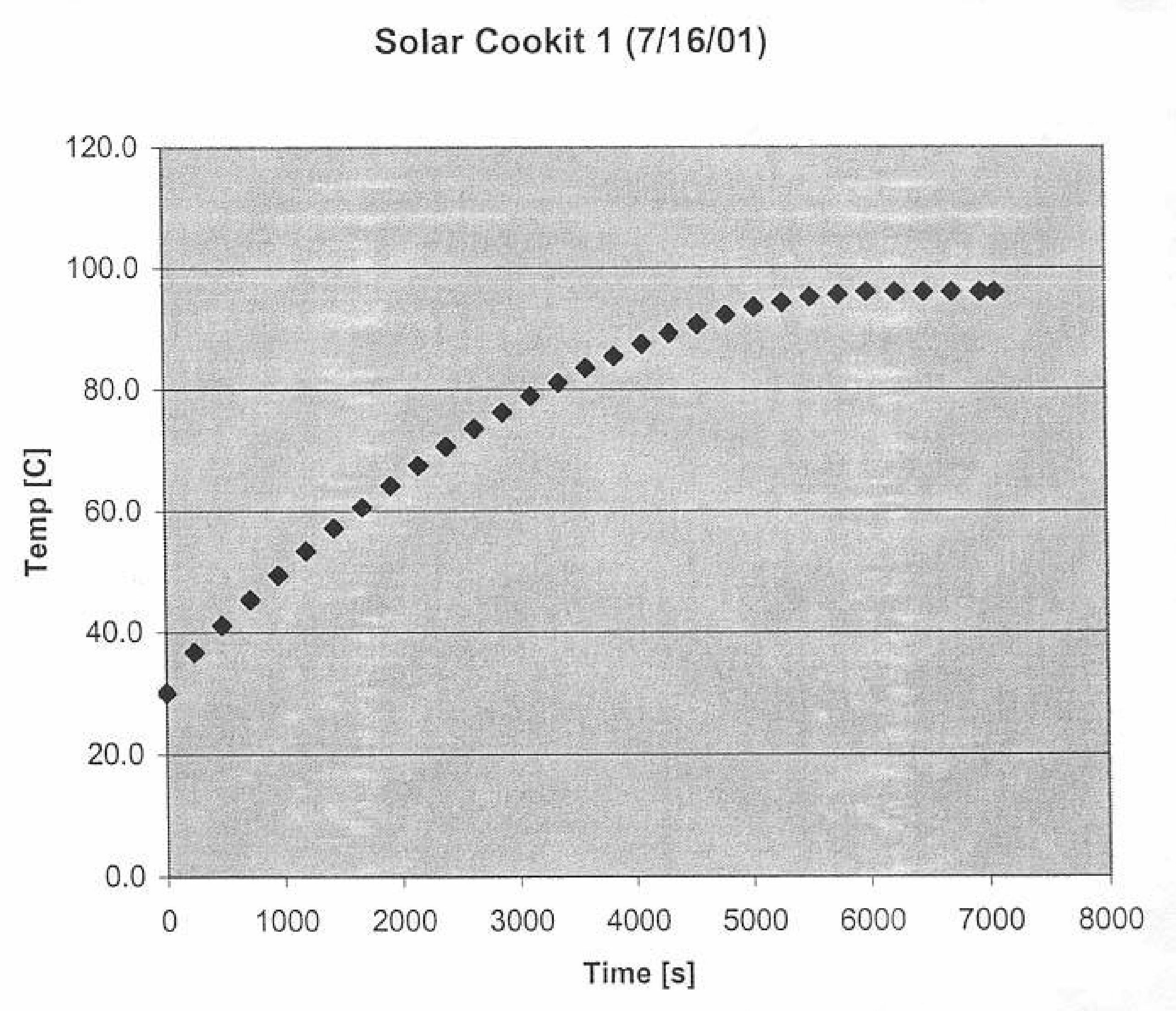
Matt vs. Mirror: Several tests were conducted on the matt versus mirror finishes. In each test, the matt finish outperformed the mirror finish. On 27 July, 2001, a matt funnel and a mirror funnel were simultaneously tested with 650 cc of water. The average power output for the mirror finish was 46.4 W ± 1.7 W, while the matt funnel put out an average of 59.4 W ± 2.1 W. The efficiency of the mirror funnel was 15.8%, while the matt was 20.2% efficient.

The following graph shows the temperatures reached by the matt and mirror funnels.



Channel 1 (Ch1) was the mirror finish, and channel 2 (Ch2) was the matt finish. This shows that both funnels peaked at about the same temperature: 97^{O}C (207^{O}F). The matt funnel peaked in about 76 minutes, whereas the mirror funnel peaked in 96 minutes, twenty minutes later. Though this perhaps a tolerable time difference for actual cooking, it is substantial. Every matt vs. mirror test performed in a similar way. These results are due to the way the matt funnel reflects the sun's rays. The mirror finish seems to focus a strip of light onto the cooking vessel more than the matt finish does. As a result, the matt finish diffuses the light more and the cooker is heated more uniformly. This is good, since the matt finish is easier to work with, delivering much less glare to the eyes.

The following graph shows the temperature rise with time for a Solar CooKit:



Comparing the two graphs above, we find that the Solar CoolKit performed very well, comparable to the Funnel Cooker. We should note that in both cases, we used a canning jar (pressurised) supported by a wire stand. We found that the wire stand improves the performance of the Solar CooKit significantly and hope that this support stand will be used in countries where the Solar CooKit is in use.

In tests where the use of the clear plastic disk was tested against the oven-bag, an aluminium pot was used in the disk-set-up. In these tests, the cooker with an oven bag outperformed the cooker using a plastic disk. On 10 August, 2001, a test was run which compared the disk/pot set-up against the oven-bag/jar set-up. Both cookers follow similar heating paths with time, but the oven-bag/jar did slightly better. Due to the higher mass of the jar compared to the mass of the aluminium pot, and the much higher heat capacity of the water, the average power output for the oven-bag/jar was 39.8 ± 1.4 W, while the disk/pot put out 30.3 W ± 1.2 W. The efficiency of the oven-bag/jar was 14.7% and the efficiency of the disk/pot set-up was 10.4% for this test. This is also partly due to the pressure-cooker effect that the canning jar produces. Though this is a considerable efficiency difference, the disk/pot set-up did very well in subjective tests where food was actually cooked and tasted. In all cases where the disk/pot set-up was used to cook food, the food cooked in about the same amount of time. The ease of the disk/pot set-up is also an important consideration. Overall, in tests where food was cooked, the disk/pot set-up was preferred over the oven-bag/jar set-up.

Conclusions:

As many countries are depleting their natural resources due to increased population and the resulting deforestation, methods other than burning wood are needed to cook food and pasteurise water. Solar cookers provide a sustainable technology that relies on the sun's free energy. We report several advances to make them better. The need for cheap and effective solar cookers is very great and growing.

The Solar Funnel Cooker has been designed to meet the growing need by being inexpensive and effective. We determined that the Solar CooKit was nearly as effective when a rabbit-wire stand was used to support the cooking vessel. By collecting time vs. temperature data, quantitative analysis has been done. This analysis approach is useful for further development of the cookers.

Several areas of research were explored in 2001. Two finishes were tested for the reflector, a matt finish and a mirror finish. The benefits of the matt over the mirror finish are:

1) The matt finish is easier to work over because the sun's glaring reflection is diffused, and
2) the matt finish out-performs the mirror finish in temperature vs. time tests.

The method of closing off the cooker from convection current was tested and compared with an alternative method – a clear plastic disk. The use of a pot rather that a canning jar was also tested. Though the present oven-bag/jar method does outperform the disk/pot method, the disk/pot method is easier to use and seems to be nearly as efficient. Finally, we showed that a wire-mesh stand is a considerable improvement over the use of a wooden block or other opaque stand for the cooking vessel. We join with our fellow researchers around the world in pursuing further development of solar cookers, particularly to benefit people in developing countries.

References:

[1]. Jones, Steven E. et al., BYU. [2]. Wattenberg, Frank. Montana State University. 1996.
[2]. Wattenberg, Frank. Montana State University. 1996.
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Recent Advances in Solar Water Pasteurisation

Boiling isn't necessary to kill disease microbes

The main purpose of solar cookers is to change sunlight into heat which is then used to cook foods. We are all familiar with how successful solar cookers are at cooking and baking a wide variety of foods. In this article I want to consider using the heat in solar cookers for purposes other than cooking. My main focus will be solar water pasteurisation, which can complement solar cooking and address critical health problems in many developing countries.

The majority of diseases in developing countries today are infectious diseases caused by bacteria, viruses, and other microbes which are shed in human faeces and polluted water which people use for drinking or washing. When people drink the live microbes, they can multiply, cause disease, and be shed in faeces into water, continuing the cycle of disease transmission.

World-wide, unsafe water is a major problem. An estimated one billion people do not have access to safe water. It is estimated that diarrhoeal diseases that result from contaminated water kill about 2 million children and cause about 900 million episodes of illness each year.

Boiling contaminated water

How can infectious microbes in water be killed to make the water safe to drink? In the cities of developed countries this is often guaranteed by chlorination of water after it has been filtered. In developing countries, however, city water systems are less reliable, and water from streams, rivers and some wells may be contaminated with human faeces and pose a health threat. For the billion people who do not have safe water to drink, what recommendation do public health officials offer? The only major recommendation is to boil the water, sometimes for up to 10 minutes. It has been known since the time of Louis Pasteur 130 years ago that heat of boiling is very effective at killing all microbes which cause disease in milk and water.

If contaminated water could be made safe for drinking by boiling, why is boiling not uniformly practised? There seem to be five major reasons:

1) people do not believe in the germ theory of disease,
2) it takes too long,
3) boiled water tastes bad,
4) fuel is often limited or costly,
5) the heat and smoke are unpleasant.

Some examples of the cost of boiling water are worth mentioning. During the cholera outbreak in Peru, the Ministry of Health urged all residents to boil drinking water for 10 minutes. The cost of doing this would amount to 29% of the average poor household income. In Bangladesh, boiling drinking water would take 11% of the income of a family in the lowest quartile. In Jakarta, Indonesia, more than $50 million is spent each year by households for boiling water. It is estimated that in the city of Cebu in the Philippines, population about 900,000, about half the families boil their drinking water, and the proportion is actually higher for families that obtain their water from an unreliable chlorinated piped supply. Because the quantities of fuel consumed for boiling water are so large, approximately 1 kilogram of wood to boil 1 litre of water, and because firewood, coal, and coke are often used for this purpose, an inadequate water supply system significantly contributes to deforestation, urban air pollution, and other energy-related environmental effects.

If wood, charcoal, or dung is used as fuel for boiling water, the smoke creates a health hazard, as it does all the time with cooking. It is estimated that 400 to 700 million people, mainly women, suffer health problems from this indoor air pollution. As a microbiologist, I have always been perplexed as to why boiling is recommended, when this is heat far in excess of that which is necessary to kill infectious microbes in water. I presume the reason boiling is recommended is to make sure that lethal temperatures have been reached, since unless one has a thermometer it is difficult to tell what temperature heated water has reached until a roaring boil is reached. Everyone is familiar with the process of milk pasteurisation. This is a heating process which is sufficient to kill the most heat resistant disease causing microbes in milk, such as the bacteria which cause tuberculosis, undulant fever, streptococcal infections and Salmonellosis. What temperatures are used to pasteurise milk? Most milk is pasteurised at 71.7^{O} C (161^{O} F) for only 15 seconds. Alternatively, 30 minutes at 62.8^{O} C (145^{O} F) can also pasteurise milk. Some bacteria are heat resistant and can survive pasteurisation, but these bacteria do not cause disease in people. They can, however, spoil the milk, so pasteurised milk is kept refrigerated.

There are some different disease microbes found in water, but they are not unusually heat resistant. The most common causes of water diseases, and their heat sensitivity, are presented in Table 1. The most common causes of acute diarrhoea among children in developing countries are the bacteria Escherichia coli and Shigelia SD. and the Rotavirus group of viruses. These are rapidly killed at temperatures of 60^{O} C or greater.

Solar water pasteurisation

As water heats in a solar cooker, temperatures of 56^{O} C and above start killing disease-causing microbes. A graduate student of mine, David Ciochetti, investigated this for his master's thesis in 1983, and concluded that heating water to 66^{O} C in a solar cooker will provide enough heat to pasteurise the water and kill all disease causing microbes. The fact that water can be made safe to drink by heating it to this lower temperature - only 66^{O} C - instead of 100^{O} C (boiling) presents a real opportunity for addressing contaminated water in developing countries.

Testing water for faecal contamination

How can one readily determine if the water from a well, pump, stream, etc. is safe to drink? The common procedure is to test the water for bacterial indicators of faecal pollution. There are two groups of indicators which are used. The first is the coliform bacteria which are used as indicators in developed countries where water is chlorinated. Coliform bacteria may come from faeces or from plants. Among the coliform bacteria is the second indicator, Escherichia coli. This bacterium is present in large numbers in human faeces (approximately 100,000,000 per gram of faeces) and that of other mammals. This is the main indicator used if water is not chlorinated. A water source containing 100 E. coli per 100 ccs poses a substantial risk of disease.

The standard method of testing water for the presence of coliforms and E. coli requires trained personnel and a good laboratory facility or field unit which are usually not present in developing countries. Thus, water supplies are almost never tested.

A new approach to testing in developing countries

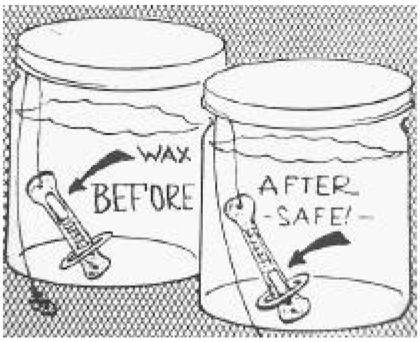
In 1987, the Colilert MPM Test (CLT) was introduced as the first method which used a defined substrate technology to simultaneously detect coliforms and E. coli. The CLT comes as dry chemicals in test tubes containing two indicator nutrients: one for coliforms and one for E. coli. The CLT involves adding 10 ml of water to a tube, shaking to dissolve the chemicals, and incubating at body temperature for 24 hours. I prefer incubating tubes under my belt against my body. At night I sleep on my back and use night clothes to hold the tubes against my body.

If no coliform bacteria are present, the water will remain clear. However, if one or more coliforms are present in the water, after 24 hours their growth will metabolise ONPG and the water will change in colour from clear to yellow (resembling urine). If E. coli is among the coliform bacteria present, it will metabolise MUG and the tube will fluoresce blue when a battery-operated, long-wave ultraviolet light shines on it, indicating a serious health hazard. I have invited participants at solar box cooker workshops in Sierra Leone, Mali, Mauritania, and Nepal to test their home water supplies with CLT. One hundred and twenty participants brought in samples. In all four countries, whether the water was from urban or rural areas, the majority of samples contained coliforms, and at least half of these had E. coli present. Bacteriological testing of the ONPG and MUG positive tubes brought back from Mali and Mauritania verified the presence of coliforms/E. coli in approximately 95% of the samples. It is likely that soon the Colilert MPN test will be modified so that the test for E. coli will not require an ultraviolet light, and the tube will turn a different colour than yellow if E coli is present. This will make the test less expensive and easier to widely use in developing countries to assess water sources.

Effect of safe water on diarrhoea in children

What would be the effect if contaminated water could be made safe for drinking by pasteurisation or boiling? One estimate predicts that if in the Philippines, families at present using moderately contaminated wells (100 E. coli per 100 ml) were able to use a high-quality water source, diarrhoea among their children would be reduced by over 30%. Thus, if water which caused a MUG (+) test were solar pasteurised so it would be clear, this would help reduce the chance of diarrhoea, especially in children.

Water pasteurisation indicator



How can one determine if heated water has reached 65^{O} C? In 1988, Dr. Fred Barrett (USDA, retired) developed the prototype for the Water Pasteurisation Indicator (WAPI). In 1992, Dale Andreatta, a graduate engineering student at the University of California, Berkeley, developed the current WAPI. The WAPI is a polycarbonate tube, sealed at both ends, partially filled with a soybean fat which melts at 69^{O} C ("MYVEROL" 18-06K, Eastman Kodak Co., Kingsport, TN 37662). The WAPI is placed inside a water container with the fat at the top of the tube. A washer will keep the WAPI on the bottom of the container, which heats the slowest in a solar box cooker. If heat from the water melts the fat, the fat will move to the bottom of the WAPI, indicating water has been pasteurised. If the fat is still at the top of the tube, the water has not been pasteurised.

The WAPI is reusable. After the fat cools and becomes solid on the bottom, the fish line string is pulled to the other end and the washer slides to the bottom, which places the fat at the top of the tube. Another pasteurisation indicator has been developed by Roland Saye which is based on expansion of a bi-metal disc which is housed in a plastic container. This also shows promise and is in the early testing stages. The WAPI could be useful immediately for people who currently boil water to make it safe to drink. The WAPI will indicate clearly when a safe temperature has been reached, and will save much fuel which is currently is being wasted by excessive heating.

[Editor's note: Using Beeswax & Carnauba Wax to Indicate Temperature: In SBJ #15 we discussed using beeswax, which melts at a relatively low 62^{O} C, as an indicator of pasteurisation. We have now found that mixing a small amount of carnauba was with the beeswax (~1:5 ratio) raises the melting temperature of the beeswax to 70^{O} - 75^{O} C. Carnauba wax is a product of Brazil and can be bought in the US at woodworking supply stores. Further testing needs to be done to confirm that the melting point remains the same after repeated re-melting. Write to webmaster@solarcooking.org and we will send you a small amount of carnauba wax with which to experiment].

Different strategies for solar water pasteurisation

The solar box cooker was first used to pasteurise water. David Ciochetti built a deep-dish solar box cooker to hold several gallons of water. At this time of the year in Sacramento, three gallons could be pasteurised on our typical sunny days.

Dale Andreatta and Derek Yegian of the University of California. Berkeley, have developed creative ways to greatly increase the quantity of water which can be pasteurised, as we will hear about at this conference.

I am also excited about the possibility of pasteurising water using the simple solar panel cookers. By enclosing a dark water container in a polyester bag to create an insulating air space, and by using lots of reflectors to bounce light onto the jar, it is possible to pasteurise useful amounts of water with a simple system. It takes about four hours for me to pasteurise a gallon of water in the summer with the system I am using. Solar panel cookers open up enormous possibilities for heating water not only for pasteurisation, but also for making coffee and tea, which are quite popular in some developing countries. The heated water can also be kept hot for a long time by placing it in its bag inside an insulated box. In the insulated container I use, a gallon of 80^{O} C water will be approximately 55^{O} C after 14 hours. Water at a temperature of 55^{O} C will be about 40^{O} C after 14 hours, ideal for washing/shaving in the morning.

I will close with some advice from the most famous microbiologist, who pioneered the use of vaccinations in the 1890s: Louis Pasteur. When he was asked the secret of his success, he responded that above all else, it was persistence. I will add that you need good data to be persistent about, and we certainly have that with solar cookers; the work in Sacramento, Bolivia, Nepal, Mali, Guatemala, and wherever else the sun shines. Continued overuse of fuel-wood is non-sustainable. We need to persist until the knowledge we have spreads and becomes common knowledge world-wide.

For questions or comments contact Dr. Robert Metcalf at rmetcalf@csus.edu.

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IDEXX Laboratories, Inc. makes the Colilert kit and is located at this address:

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Westbrook, ME 04092
USA
Voice: (800) 321-0207 or (207) 856-0496
Fax: (207) 856-0630

Editor's Note: Testing Water in Developing Countries

The Colilert system makes it possible to test water without the need for a laboratory. IDEXX Laboratories, the manufacturer, recommends that you use five test tubes for each sample. Bob Metcalf explains that five tubes would comprise 50 ml, which is the minimum sample size permitted by US law. This is an unrealistically high standard by which to judge the water in developing countries where you are examining water that is already being drunk, in spite of the fact that it may be making people sick. By using a single test tube (10 ml) there is a very small chance that your sample missed the small number of bacteria that might have been present.

IDEXX Laboratories will also tell you that you need an incubator to achieve valid results. Again, Bob Metcalf tells us that all that is needed is to keep the tubes close to your body for 36 hours, since body temperature is the correct incubation temperature.

What you are actually measuring in the test is the presence of 1) coliform bacteria, and 2) E. coli, a type of coliform bacteria that is largely found in faecal mattr. A positive test for coliform bacteria might be due to coliform bacteria that has washed off of plant leaves , and thus be fairly innocuous. A positive test for E. coli, however, would indicate that any bacteriological contamination was from a faecal source, which might also contain Giardia, cholera, or other serious infectious microbes.

This document is published on The Solar Cooking Archive at
http://solarcooking.org/pasteurisation/metcalf.htm. For questions or comments, contact
webmaster@solarcooking.org

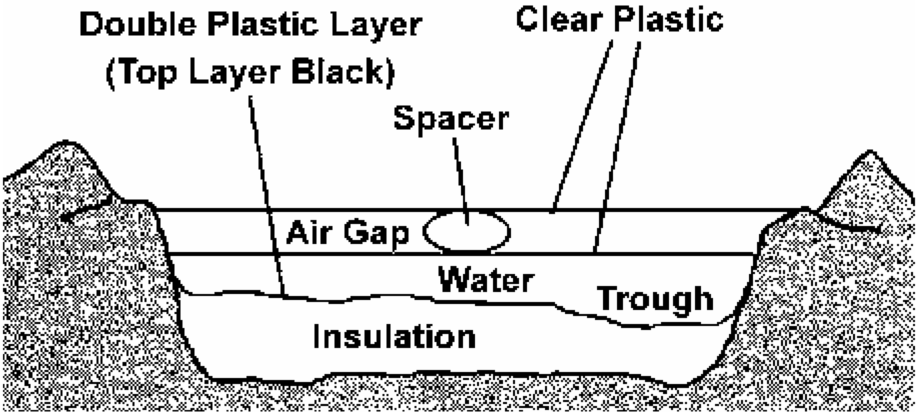
The Solar Puddle

A new water pasteurisation technique for large amounts of water

The lack of clean drinking water is a major health problem in the developing world. To reduce this health risk ways of producing clean water at an affordable cost are needed, and people need to be educated about germs and sanitation, lest they accidentally re-contaminate their clean drinking water. Recently, several of us at the University of California at Berkeley have attacked the first of these requirements. Previous issues of this newsletter have included stories about our water pasteurisation indicator and our flow-through water pasteurises based on a design by PAX World Service. In this article we describe a new low-cost device that pasteurises water.

For those not familiar with the pasteurisation process, if water is heated to 149^{O} F (65^{O} C) for about 6 minutes all the germs, viruses, and parasites that cause disease in humans are killed, including cholera and hepatitis A and B. [Ed. We have reports from the field that at 145^{O} F (63^{O} C) in a solar puddle, bacterial growth might actually be increased. Since this temperature is very close to the minimum pasteurisation temperature mentioned in this article, we suggest that you heat the water to a higher temperature and perform tests before adopting a solar puddle as your method of pasteurisation]. This is similar to what is done with milk and other beverages. It is not necessary to boil the water as many people believe. Pasteurisation is not the only way to decontaminate drinking water, but pasteurisation is particularly easy to scale down so the initial cost is low.

The new device is called a solar puddle, and it is essentially a puddle in a greenhouse. One form of the solar puddle is sketched in the figure below, though many variations are possible.



One begins by digging a shallow pit about 4 inches deep. The test device was a "family-size" unit, about 3.5 feet by 3.5 feet, but the puddle could be made larger or smaller. If the puddle is made larger there is more water to pasteurise, but there is also proportionately more sunshine collected. The pit is filled with 2 to 4 inches of solid insulation. We used wadded paper, but straw, grass, leaves, or twigs could be used. This layer of insulation should be made flat, except for a low spot in one corner of the puddle.

Put a layer of clear plastic and then a layer of black plastic over the insulation with the edges of the plastic extending up and out of the pit. Two layers are used in case one develops a small leak. We used inexpensive polyethylene from a hardware store, though special UV stabilised plastic would last longer. Put in some water and flatten out the insulation so that the water depth is even to within about 0.5 inch throughout the puddle, except in the trough which should be about 1 inch deeper than the rest. Put in more water so that the average depth is 1 to 3 inches depending on how much sunshine is expected.

A pasteurisation indicator (available from Solar Cookers International at 916/455-4499) should go in this trough since this is where the coolest water will collect. Put a layer of clear plastic over the water, again with the edges extending beyond the edges extending beyond the edges of the pit. Form an insulating air gap by putting one or more spacers on top of the third layer of plastic (large wads of paper will do) and putting down a fourth layer of plastic, which must also be clear. The thickness of the air gap should be 2 inches or more. Pile dirt or rocks on the edges of the plastic sheets to hold them down. The puddle is drained by siphoning the water out, placing the siphon in the trough and holding it down by a rock or weight. If the bottom of the puddle is flat, well over 90% of the water can be siphoned out.

Once the puddle is built it would be used by adding water each day, either by folding back the top two layers of plastic in one corner and adding water by bucket, or by using a fill siphon. The fill siphon should NOT be the same siphon that is used to drain the puddle, as the fill siphon is re-contaminated each day, while the drain siphon MUST REMAIN CLEAN. Once in place the drain siphon should be left in place for the life of the puddle.

The only expensive materials used to make the puddle are a pasteurisation indicator (about $2 for the size tested). All of these items are easily transportable, so the solar puddle might be an excellent option for a refugee camp if the expertise were available for setting them up.

Many tests were done in the spring and summer of this year in Berkeley, California. On days with good sunshine the required temperature was achieved even with 17 gallons of water (2 1/2 inch depth). About 1 gallon is the minimum daily requirement per person, for drinking, brushing one's teeth, and dish washing. With thinner water layers higher temperatures can be reached. With 6 gallons (1 inch depth) 176^{O} F was achieved on one day.

The device seems to work even under conditions that are not ideal. Condensation in the top layer of plastic doesn't seem to be a problem, though if one gets a lot of condensation the top layer should be pulled back to let the condensation evaporate. Small holes in the top layers don't make much difference. The device works in wind, or if the bottom insulation is damp. Water temperature is uniform throughout the puddle to within 2^{O} F.

After some months the top plastic layers weaken under the combined effects of sun and heat and have to be replaced, but this can be minimised by avoiding hot spots. Another option would be to use a grade of plastic that is more resistant to sunlight. The two bottom layers of plastic tend to form tiny tears unless one is very careful in handling them, (that is why there are two layers on the bottom). A tiny hole may let a little water through and dampen the solid insulation, but this is not a big problem.

There are many variations of the solar puddle. We've been able to put the top layer of plastic into a tent-like arrangement that sheds rain. This would be good in a place that gets frequent brief showers. Adding a second insulating layer of air makes the device work even better, though this adds the cost of an extra layer of plastic. As mentioned the device can cover a larger or smaller area if more or less water is desired. One could make a water heater by roughly tripling the amount of water so that the maximum temperature was only 120° F or so, and this water would stay warm well into the evening hours. This water wouldn't be pasteurised though. One could help solve the problem of dirty water vessels by putting drinking cups into the solar puddle and pasteurising them along with the water. The solar puddle could possibly cook foods like rice on an emergency basis, perhaps in a refugee camp.

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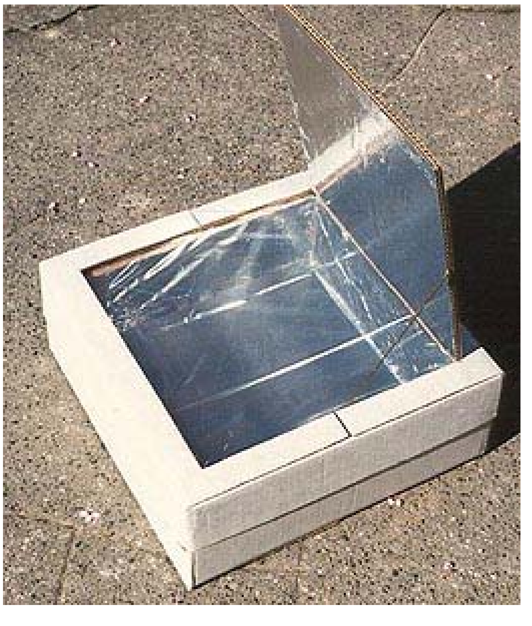
This document is published on The Solar Cooking Archive at
http://solarcooking.org/pasteurisation/puddle.htm. For questions or comments, contact
webmaster@solarcooking.org

Important web link: http://solarcooking.org/plans/default.htm

The "Easy Lid" Cooker

Designed by Chao Tan and Tom Sponheim



Although designs for cardboard cookers have become more simple, fitting a lid can still be difficult and time consuming. In this version, a lid is formed automatically from the outer box.

Making the Base

Take a large box and cut it in half as shown in Figure 1. Set one half aside to be used for the lid. The other half becomes the base.

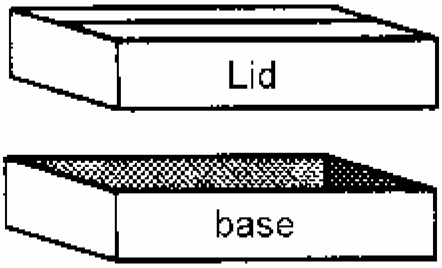


Figure 1

Fold an extra cardboard piece so that it forms a liner around the inside of the base (see Figure 2).

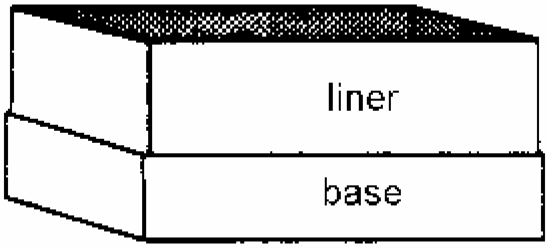


Figure 2

Use the lid piece as shown in Figure 3 to mark a line around the liner.

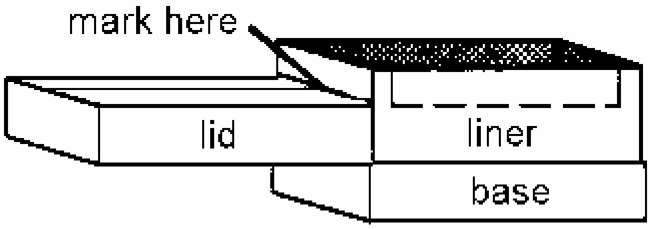


Figure 3

Cut along this line, leaving the four tabs as shown in Figure 4.

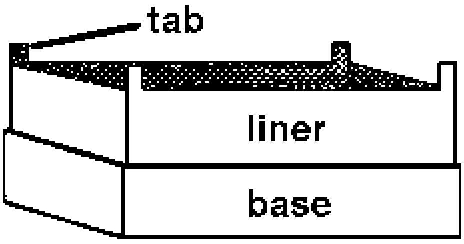


Figure 4

Glue aluminum foil to the inside of the liner and to the bottom of the outer box inside.

Set a smaller (inner) box into the opening formed by the liner until the flaps of the smaller box are horizontal and flush with the top of the liner (see Figure 5). Place some wads of newspaper between the two boxes for support.

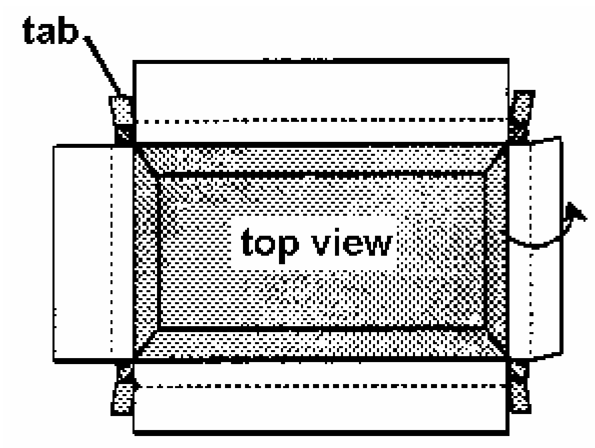


Figure 5

Mark the underside of the flaps of the smaller box using the liner as a guide.

Fold these flaps down to fit down around the top of the liner and tuck them into the space between the base and the liner (see Figure 6).

Fold the tabs over and tuck them under the flaps of the inner box so that they obstruct the holes in the four corners (see Figure 6).

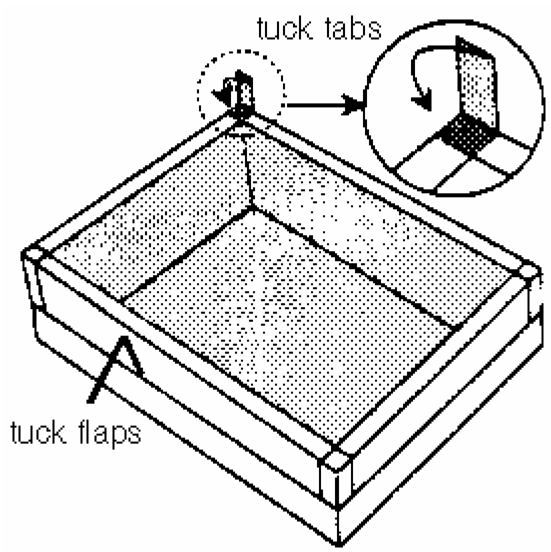


Figure 6

Now glue these pieces together in their present configuration.

As the glue is drying, line the inside of the inner box with aluminum foil.

Finishing the Lid

Measure the width of the walls of the base and use these measurements to calculate where to make the cuts that form the reflector in Figure 7. Only cut on three sides. The reflector is folded up using the fourth side as a hinge.

Glue plastic or glass in place on the underside of the lid. If you are using glass, sandwich the glass using extra strips of cardboard. Allow to dry.

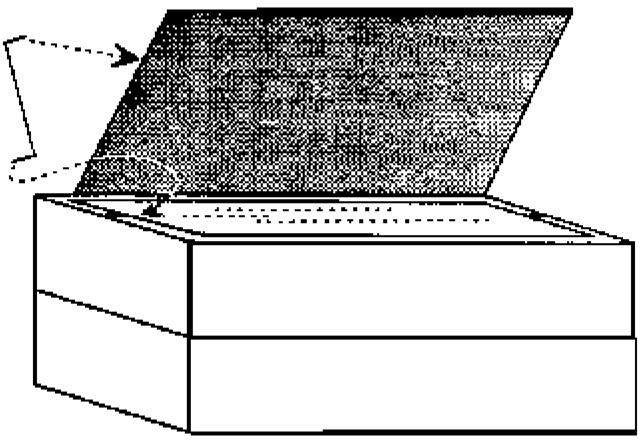


Figure 7

Bend the ends of the wire as shown in Figure 7 and insert these into the corrugations on the lid and on the reflector to prop open the latter.

Paint the sheet metal (or cardboard) piece black and place it into the inside of the oven.

Improving Efficiency

Glue thin strips of cardboard underneath the sheet metal (or cardboard) piece to elevate it off of the bottom of the oven slightly.

Cut off the reflector and replace it with one that is as large as (or larger than) the entire lid. This reflects light into the oven more reliably.

Turn the oven over and open the bottom flaps. Place one foiled cardboard panel into each airspace to divide each into two spaces. The foiled side should face the center of the oven.

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