

The Future of Improved Food Preservation with Vacuum Drying

Sanasam Angousana^{1*}, Alok Singh¹, Ajoy Guragai² and Simadri Rajasri³

Introduction:

Vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants are abundant in horticultural crops such as fruits, vegetables, herbs, and decorative plants. However, because of their high moisture content and continued physiological activity, these crops spoil rapidly after harvest. Large post-harvest losses result from this, particularly during peak seasons. In order to extend shelf life and minimize waste, safe and effective drying technologies are crucial. Due to its simplicity and affordability, traditional hot-air (convective) drying is widely utilized. But it exposes the product to high temperatures and oxygen for extended periods of time. Oxidation, browning, poor color, shrinkage, and the loss of heat-sensitive nutrients like vitamin C, polyphenols, and other significant bioactive compounds are frequently the results of this. Vacuum drying is a more advanced and superior drying method for horticultural products. It lowers the boiling point of water by operating under reduced pressure (vacuum). As a result, moisture can be eliminated at low temperatures (roughly 20–60°C as opposed to

100°C). Heat-sensitive crops retain their natural color, nutrients, flavor, and structure thanks to this mild drying. Fruits, vegetables, herbs, and decorative materials can all benefit from vacuum drying, which yields premium dried goods like snacks, powders, and ingredients with added value. Non-climacteric fruit King chilli (Bhoot Jolokia) which is very perishable in nature can be dried with vacuum dryer to reduce postharvest loss (Angousana, 2026). The working principles, uses, recent advancements, and potential applications of vacuum drying in horticultural crops are highlighted.

Fundamentals and Workings principles of Vacuum Drying:

The process of vacuum drying involves lowering the boiling point of water to between 20 and 60 °C by applying pressure below atmospheric levels, usually between 0.01 and 0.1 MPa. The pressure gradient causes moisture to evaporate quickly, preventing oxidation and enzymatic browning in crops like mangoes and strawberries. Diffusion-

Sanasam Angousana^{1}, Alok Singh¹, Ajoy Guragai² and Simadri Rajasri³*

¹PhD Research Scholar, Department of Pomology and Post Harvest Technology,

²PhD Research Scholar, Department of Plantation Crops and Processing,

³PhD Research Scholar, Department of Agricultural Extension

Uttar Banga Krishi Vishwavidyalaya, West Bengal, India

controlled evaporation and capillary flow, which are amplified in porous structures created during drying, are important mechanisms.

There are three primary steps in the vacuum's drying process:

Pressure Reduction: To achieve the required vacuum level, the chamber pressure is reduced.

Heat Transfer: The latent heat of vaporisation is produced by radiation or conduction (heated shelves).

Mass Transfer: Water vapour travels from the crop's interior to its surface, where a condenser and vacuum pump remove it from the vacuum chamber.

When compared to ambient-pressure drying at the same temperature, the lack of air lowers the resistance to moisture diffusion from the internal capillary structures to the surface, frequently leading to faster drying rates.

Advanced Hybrid Vacuum Systems:

The poor heat transmission in a hoover (no convection) can make "pure" hoover drying slow, according to recent research. Hybrid systems have been made to get round.

⇒ **Microwave-Assisted Vacuum Drying**

Microwave-Assisted Vacuum Drying is a combination of the low temperature benefits of hoover and the fast volumetric heating of microwaves. When microwaves enter a

product, the water molecules rotate in a dipole movement, which creates an internal "pressure swing" and forces moisture out.

⇒ **Vacuum Drying with Infrared Assistance**

Without heating the ambient air, infrared radiation provides a high rate of heat transfer directly to the surface of the product.

⇒ **Pulsed Vacuum Drying**

Pulsed Vacuum Drying is a method in which there are periodic variations in chamber pressure. This "pulsing" action generates a mechanical pumping action within the pores of the horticultural crop, and the moisture removal is greatly accelerated and the total energy consumption is greatly reduced compared to steady-state vacuum drying.

⇒ **Ultrasound-Assisted Vacuum Drying**

Power ultrasound causes cavitation and "micro-channels" to form in the fruit tissue.

When combined with vacuum, these channels are more easily used to let water escape and even lower processing temperatures can be used, which is ideal for highly sensitive medicinal herbs. Effect on Quality Attributes The main reason for the adoption of Vacuum Drying in the food industry is the better quality of the end product.

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⇒ Bioactive Compounds and Antioxidant Capacity

Horticultural crops are valued for their Vitamin C, carotenoids and anthocyanins. Studies show that Vitamin C retention is as high as 80-90% with Vacuum Drying whereas retention can be as low as 40% with hot air drying. The low-oxygen environment is critical in order to prevent oxidation of phenolic compounds and thus the final product maintains its functional health benefits.

⇒ Physical Properties: Color and Texture

☞ **Color:** The absence of oxygen inhibits polyphenol oxidase activity, the enzyme responsible for browning. This leaves dried products that are almost identical in color to the fresh crop. Vacuum dried products usually have a porous structure

☞ **Rehydration:** Vacuum-dried products

typically exhibit a porous structure. Unlike the case-hardening (shrunken, hard skin) seen in air drying, Vacuum Drying products rehydrate quickly and more completely, approaching the original volume of the fresh sample.





☞ **Shrinkage:** While some shrinkage is inevitable, the "puffing" effect in Microwave-Assisted Vacuum Drying can actually produce a crunchy, expanded texture that is highly desirable in the snack food market.

☞ **Activation Energy:** The energy barrier for moisture evaporation is lower in a vacuum, which translates to less thermal stress on the plant cells.

Energy Efficiency and Economic Considerations:

Energy Efficiency and Economic Considerations: Historically Vacuum drying was

Conventional Air Drying vs. Vacuum Drying

Feature	Conventional Air Drying	Vacuum Drying
 Color	Browns or fades	Stays bright and natural
 Nutrients	High loss of vitamins	Up to 90% retention
 Flavor	"Cooked" or bland	Intense and fresh
 Texture	Tough and shrunken	Porous and crunchy

regarded as expensive because of the energy needed to hold a vacuum and the cost of the pressure vessel.

⇒ **Shortened Cycles:** The drastic reduction in drying time (especially in Microwave-Assisted Vacuum Drying) can lead to lower total energy consumption per kilogram of product compared to long-cycle convective drying.

⇒ **Value-Addition:** The high price paid for high-quality, vacuum-dried "superfoods" often covers the high capital expenditure of the equipment.

Future Prospects in Horticulture:

Vacuum drying is in line with sustainable objectives, as it helps to reduce post-harvest losses (20-40% in developing regions), by facilitating year-round premium exports. For Indian horticulture, as in the case of mango, guava etc., localized hybrids may increase farmer incomes. Scaling through modular units is supportive of SMEs, and research is in the area of low-cost vacuum sources.

Integration with cold chains and quality sensors will add to uptake which could capture 15% of the \$50B global dried fruit market by 2030. Ongoing trials in pulsed electric field pre-treatments are promising even better nutrient locking

Conclusion:

Vacuum drying is a transformational technique for horticulture crops, providing higher quality, efficiency, and sustainability than traditional approaches. Its hybrids and pulsed variations overcome fundamental problems, paving the path for wider implementation in research and industry, particularly in places with plentiful perishable food, such as India. Continued innovation promises to cut losses, boost exports, and create value-added goods that fulfil worldwide demand for healthy, convenient foods.

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