

Food Storage

Because fall is when the glut of harvest comes in – whether you grow it or buy it – fall is an ideal time to start storing food. It is more affordable than other times of the year, and there is generally plenty available.

Our presentation today will cover three of the top methods of storing food.

For those of you who don't know, I have a large family and what some would consider a small house, with no basement or attic. I didn't grow up knowing or doing any of this. My point is, if I can do this, anybody can.

When it comes to food storage, it is important to consider what you actually have (instead of what you don't). You may have space for an extra freezer (or not). You may have – or be able to put up – some shelves to store things on. You may have a root cellar or, more likely, a root cellar-equivalent like the north side of a basement or a crawl space or a slightly heated garage). You may have space underneath your bed. Think creatively and use what you have.

The food you store should reflect not only your family's size but also your cooking habits. This may change over time, so please re-evaluate regularly. There are many books and blog posts written about food storage; my methodology was simpler. I bought more of what we already use. :-)

The Complete Tightwad Gazette by Amy Dacyczyn (highly recommended) discusses what she calls the pantry principle. The idea is to buy in bulk when it's on sale and eat out of your pantry, replacing items as they go on sale again (or are needed). So, for example, when peanut butter is on sale, buy a case (or, better, enough to get you through to the next sale; sales are often predictable. You can ask your grocery store manager about the sale schedule).

This used to be considered common sense, as there have always been unexpected times of hardship, whether personal, climactic or societal. Strangely, having a deep pantry has now come to be considered paranoid and “prepper”. My suggestion is to stick with traditional common sense.

It is best to start small and build slowly. Not only is this more affordable, but it also makes it less overwhelming. Since the goal is to build our food storage muscles and continue the practice long term, it is best to start in ways that are not exhausting. For example, if you would like to try canning tomatoes, start with 10 lbs. instead of 200 lbs., and consider doing it with a friend who has canned tomatoes before.

My method of food storage was to buy more of what we already use. That method may or may not work for you, depending on what you eat. If your diet does not immediately lend itself to storability, you may find some of the food you currently eat may be storable, perhaps in a different form (such as dehydrated or in oil or canned). Or you may want to

carefully consider what you would be willing to eat that is storable. What I do not recommend is storing a lot of food you would not want to eat.

A few tips:

- Grocery stores with bakeries get frosting, etc., in food-grade 3-to-5-gallon buckets that they throw away every day. You can speak with the bakery manager and ask to pick them up. You may have to wash them, though they usually wash them for you. You can usually accumulate a few a week that way. I do not worry about storing in Mylar bags or specially sealed tops. However, I do include six bay leaves on top of whatever you're storing in the bucket before closing the lid, which nearly always prevents any bug infestations.
- Other things to consider storing include spices (very important as bland food is a morale killer), vitamins, medicines and first aid supplies. Post-covid, that list should include toilet paper. ☐ ☐
- Many people forget to store water. A Berkey water filter, which operates without electricity, may be valuable depending on your water supply.

General Food Storage Principles

There are as many ways to store food as there are people, probably. The most well-known currently are:

- freezing
- canning
- dehydrating
- fermenting (a classic is [The Art of Fermentation](#) by Sandor Ellix Katz but there are also many other good ones)

However, there are many lesser-known ways used by traditional people, including:

- preserving in a root cellar (which is generally the same as a crawl space, if dry; the classic reference is [Root Cellaring](#) by Mike and Nancy Bubel. There are plans in the book for a “root cellar” set up in the coldest corner of a basement, for those who have a basement.)
- preserving in oil (see [Keeping Food Fresh](#) by Claude Aubert)
- preserving in vinegar
- preserving in salt
- sugar (including honey)
- alcohol
- smoking (there are various DIY versions as well as professional smokers, or you can barter with someone to use theirs once in a while)

Another not-often-mentioned classic is what Virginia farmer Joel Salatin refers to as "storage on the hoof" (i.e., not preserved, but fresh). This can also be used for greens and winter vegetables using Eliot Coleman's method of an unheated winter greenhouse or hoop house over your existing garden bed; see his book [The Four-Season Harvest](#) (our gardening zone but on the coast of Maine, so worse winds) or

Niki Jabbour's Growing Under Cover and Year-Round Vegetable Gardener (same gardening zone but in Nova Scotia so less light in the winter).

Also consider indoor growing, such as sprouts or indoor garden beds/pots under a shop light. A good book in that genre is Year-Round Indoor Salad Gardening by Peter Burke.

One indoor technique I have no experience with but resources abound is growing hydroponically. (Solari member Sandy Campagna has lots of experience with this and sells hydroponic kits; Bill has been using his for a few years now.)

There are also techniques to lengthen the life of fresh food you have, by storing it properly. Fruits and vegetables last longer when they are grown in healthy soil, when they are carefully handled (no bruises) and when they are stored according to their preferences. Food storage generally falls into the following categories:

- Cool, humid, dark
- Dry, ventilated, room lit
- Dry, ventilated, dark

It also matters whether the food produces ethylene and/or is sensitive to it. For example, if you store apples (which produce ethylene) in your root cellar next to pumpkins (which are sensitive to it), it will cause the pumpkins to spoil pretty quickly. Apart (or with good ventilation), the pumpkins might have lasted the whole winter. This is important if you are storing fresh foods, but it doesn't apply to things like beans, grains and herbs. The French website *Low Tech Lab* has excellent information about these, with an especially lovely grid you can print for reference.

If you are growing your own food, it is important to know how to cure it for storage. Things like onions, garlic and squash will last much longer if cured properly.

You also need to consider what scenarios might occur. If you choose, for example, to store everything in your freezer and the grid goes down, you could have a calamity on your hands unless you have a generator and access to refueling (solar/gas/natural gas). On the other hand, if you prepared for that by having canning supplies enough to can what is in your freezer -- and know how to do it -- you can do that as a back-up in an emergency.

Then there are the cautions about rotating your food, so you are using and replacing it regularly. This is more important when stored fresh (like apples or squash), and less important when the food is frozen, canned or dried AND sealed well.

You can see this can get complicated and overwhelming. On the other hand, you can use my simpler method, and store more of what you already eat. Use this information to help you think through how best to store it.

Suggested resources and options:

- Mormon food prep sites (Mormons, as a tenet of their religion, believe every person should store one year of food). There are many suggestions, usually more focused on how to store what you already eat, often more "convenience" foods.
- *Granola Shotgun* blog, perhaps starting with the "Recipes for Disaster" post. He is a single guy in a one bedroom apartment who has genius ways of storing a wide variety of whole food, acquiring it cheap, and using it very well (he's a foodie).
- Keeping Food Fresh: Old World Techniques and Recipes, by the Gardeners and Farmers of Terre Vivante. This records ways traditional French people have stored food in various ways without electricity. The usual food storage books count on canning, freezing or drying. This book details a far wider array of techniques.
- *Low Tech Lab: Food Storage Beyond the Refrigerator* (online): Contains a description of food storage solutions according to food type. It's important to know that some food stores better if dark, dry and ventilated (potatoes); some prefer dark, cold and humid (beans, butter), etc. The site was translated from French and includes a lot of ideas and a nice chart of how to store different kinds of fruits and vegetables.
- **There are other food possibilities in using what we normally don't use** -- for example, carrot tops. A good resource on this: The CSA Cookbook by Linda Ly (now retitled The No-Waste Vegetable Cookbook). For example, it turns out Americans are the only ones in the world who eat unripened broccoli florets. Everyone else in the world eats the leaves, the stems and the flowers, but not the florets. Another example: bamboo was not an invasive weed when everyone saw it as a food source.
- I also have books on **wild foraging**, and occasionally practice. Yes, you can generally eat the weeds! However, make sure you choose a book based in the Midwest, such as authors Sam Thayer or Peter Gail, as directions for foraging for clams on the east coast or combing the boreal forest of the northwest for mushrooms will not be helpful (though fun to read).
- There are **several books written during difficult times when food was scarce** (war, depression) that have helpful tips on how to stretch food, make a monotonous diet more appetizing, etc. Here are three good ones: An Everlasting Meal by Tamar Adler, More-with-Less Cookbook by Doris Janzen Longacre and Good Recipes for Hard Times by Louise Newton. Entire nations have a food culture based on this -- for example, the Japanese. They eat what is in season and are extremely creative in using what we would call leftovers -- in sushi (nori) rolls, bento boxes, etc.
- I have no experience with **fishing, hunting or trapping**, but certainly those are other options. Obviously having supplies to fish, hunt or trap, and also to process and preserve meat would be important (smoking, drying or canning might be options). Hunted meat can also be accessible to those who don't hunt by means of barter and trade. You can plan for that by knowing who hunts, and preferably setting up that now so you can both be in the habit of using it, and in regular relationship with the hunter.