

By Rowena Aldridge

These days a lot of people are concerned, and rightly so, about their family's economic stability and security. Recently I've become aware of the ways in which I, a stay-at-home mother, can enhance my own family's feelings of security. I'm going to share my ideas in the hope that they will help others find more peace and comfort in their homes, too.



The place I've found that I have the most control, and thus the most leeway, is in the family grocery budget. Many people assume that cutting back on spending here involves either doing without healthy foods or extreme coupon shopping (the kind of couponing where you make a giant project out of trying to get everything free or at almost no cost). Neither assumption is true — as long as you know how to gear up and how to strategically use your opportunities.

First I'll talk about how to "get ready to get ready." By that I mean little things you can do — and in some cases, buy — to take advantage of opportunities to be prepared. The biggest revelation I've had recently is that

being *set up* is the key; once you are ready to be ready, you can prepare with ease and without a whirlwind of back-breaking work.

Prepping to prep

Start with little, routine things. Here are some you can do right now that will make the rest of this series more useful to you:

1. Every time you prepare veggies for a meal, prep double. This means, for example, if you're cutting up one onion, cut two while you're at it and put the second in the freezer for future use. I keep labeled zip top bags in the freezer just for this purpose — a bag of chopped onions, a bag of sliced carrots, etc.

2. Every time you prepare a meal, keep all the veggie trimmings — everything — the onion skins and the celery tops and the carrot shavings and so forth. Put them in another labeled bag in the freezer and add to that bag as you go. Oh, and save the net onion bags. Cut off any metal ends, fold the bags and put them in with the veggies. You'll use

these, I promise! If you have starchy items such as potato peels, put them in a separate bag. Apple and pear peels go in a bag together, citrus peels go together. Banana peels go on the compost pile.

3. When you find something on sale (meat or veggies, fresh or frozen), go for it. Don't be shy. Get as much as you can afford or have room to store. You don't have to know what to do with it right away, but when you've taken the steps I'll outline, you'll have plenty of ideas.

Ok, that's the small stuff you can do. Now to the stuff I recommend you have — but you don't have to buy new. Ask family and friends if they have any of these. Maybe they would be willing to share their gear and even work together on some of the steps I'll show you next. Also check your local Craigslist and Freecycle groups. Lots of people are downsizing and you might find just what you're looking for there.

The items that I strongly urge you to have available are:

1. A food dehydrator. You can dehydrate food in your oven but that ties it up and also costs a lot of money to run. Plus, do you really want to run your oven for hours a day in August? A dehydrator can be set up and left while you do other things like plan the exotic vacation you'll take when you retire. In the next section of this article I'll talk a little more about how I use my dehydrators.

2. A pressure canner. Get the largest one that will fit on the largest burner of your stove. This is the only canner you need. You cannot use a pressure *cooker* for canning unless it is rated specifically for this purpose by the manufacturer, but you can use a pressure *canner* for canning, cooking, and water bath processing.

3. A vacuum sealer. With this item you'll also need a few accessories to take full advantage of its usefulness — some jar sealers, at least, and a canister sealer if you have a bonus burning money in your pocket. (We'll talk much more about this in the next article.)

Other items you can pick up as you need them are: canning jars with new lids, a roll of vacuum sealer bags, and canning tools.

Those are the basics. You can certainly invest in more convenience-enhancing items such as a food processor, a stand mixer, a mandolin ... whatever. But for now, make sure you have the above items ready to go. I'll explain how and why to use each of these items

and I'll give you examples of how to get the most out of them.

Now, on to dehydrating!



I stash all my veggie trimmings for making stock in the freezer door where I can get to it daily.

Food dehydrating

As we continue to explore ways to get the most from your family's food budget without compromising your health or sanity, a food dehydrator is your friend.

First: why would you choose dehydrating instead of freezing or canning?

Dehydrated foods take a small fraction of the storage space that canned or frozen foods do, and with proper storage some can last for up to 30 years. They weigh a lot less, too, so they are very convenient for carrying in a backpack while camping or hiking, and they can go into your emergency storage as well. They are the first choice of disaster and survival experts, which ranks dehydrated foods very high on my list of needs.

There are plenty of websites and books that describe in detail how to operate dehydrators and how to prepare your foods for dehydrating, so I'm not going to go into that here (see web addresses in the sidebar). Instead I'm going to outline scenarios in which your dehydrator is as useful and productive as possible.

Scenario #1: Your cup, and your garden and the farmer's market, runneth over.

That's where most of us are every late summer or early fall. Beautiful, fresh produce is available everywhere you look, either free from your own garden, very cheap from the farmer's market, or via roadside stands. If you have neighbors like my sister Lala, a plethora of squash, tomatoes, and peppers might be left anonymously in a bag on your front porch (repeatedly) overnight while you sleep.

The problem here is that dehydrating can be slow (depending on the weather and so forth), and stuff goes bad quicker at that time of year. And that's aside from the amount of space you need to store all this extra food. So what I advise here is to prep as much as your dehydrators will hold (you are going to ~~need want~~ covet more than one eventually) and load them up. Then go ahead and prep the rest of your bounty and put it in the freezer. You can pull it out in a couple of days or even weeks from now and put it into the dehydrator then.

In fact, when your local mega-grocery-store has a mega-super-sale on frozen veggies, load up. Those veggies are already prepped for you. Just dump them onto your dehydrator trays and off they go! Warning: this is the gateway drug of food drying; the only way to dehydrate food more passively is to have someone else do it for you.

Scenario #2: Your eyes are bigger, and less discriminating, than your stomach.

This is when you go to the market hungry and you plan to shop for the week, but because you didn't eat lunch beforehand you end up with 15 pounds of zucchini, one box of strawberries, and a humongous watermelon ... not that I'd know anything about such a scenario.

Anyhoo, the idea here is that you eat what you can while it's fresh and you put the rest in the dehydrator before it goes bad. Thus, you'll end up with a little of this, a little of that, but as long as you don't have anything with a strong aroma, it can all go in together and you just take things out as they reach their appropriate stage of doneness.

Things to remember in this scenario: Anything with a heavy aroma or that emits a strong essential oil should be dried separately from other foods — and ideally separate from your living area. For example, onions and garlic will permeate every square inch of your house; they will knock down your closet doors and camp in your clothes, and they will drive your friends and family away. Hot peppers will make you wish you had just moved out of your house. I strongly advise you to dry these things in a detached garage or outside.

Anything drippy should be placed on the bottom trays first. Then later, when they have dried a bit, you can rotate them as needed. Fruits dry well with other fruits, veggies with other veggies, and some things can co-mingle just fine.

Scenario #3: Extreme dehydrating: veggie powders.

Ok, you've mastered the basics but you want to take it up a notch. You've gone out and picked up a few fruit roll-up trays for your dehydrator and have made yourself some handy snacks to take to the park. Now here's how to put those trays into overdrive.

Puree any leftover veggies from roasts or stews and put them on the trays in the dehydrator. Dry until the mixture crumbles, then put it into your blender or food processor and turn it into a powder. This powder will store indefinitely in an airtight container and you can use it to enrich soups, vegetable smoothies, or what have you. No waste.

If you have a juicer you can do something similar with all the veggie gunk left over from pressing the juice. Make up some packets to carry in your lunch bag, to pack for camping, or to send to your favorite college student in a care package. Just add water and you have a nutritious, delicious meal that is full of vitamins and has in it only the ingredients you choose. And no waste.

How else can you use these powders? Try adding them to your favorite homemade pasta recipe. Use some in your bread or pizza dough. Mix some into the breading for your fried chicken.

Moms-to-be, when you're in that nesting phase that makes you want to polish all the light bulbs and rearrange the decorative logs in the fireplace, channel that energy into making foods for your baby. Every time you handle something that would make a good starter food — ripe bananas, baked sweet potatoes, etc. — mash or puree some, dry it and powder it as described above. When it's time to begin feeding your baby solid foods, you'll have a nice stash to get you started. You can carry packets in a diaper bag and have a nutritious meal ready with just a little warm water. Plus — no waste.

Gardeners: you know how hard it is to get anything to compost in the winter? Dehydrate your stuff, then sprinkle it on the compost pile. Heck, now that I think about it, you can probably just sprinkle the powder directly into the garden.

Lazy gift-giver bonus scenario.

Your dehydrator can be making presents while you sit on the couch with some bon-bons and trashy magazines. Just toss some herbs in the dehydrator, add some flowers and the peels from the apples you used to make a pie and — voila! — you have the makings of a beautiful potpourri or herbal tea mix. You can also go the old-school route and package some basil, thyme, or rosemary to give to your favorite gourmet cook. Just think of the possibilities. Herbal bath soaks. Dried wreaths. Mulled cider spices. Stuff to simmer on the stove to make visitors think you've been baking all day.



Beautiful, fresh produce is everywhere you look, either free from your own garden, very cheap from the farmer's market or roadside stands, or left anonymously in a bag on your front porch; this is where your dehydrator comes in.

Home canning

When I was growing up, I never saw anybody doing home canning. I know that people did can at home because I saw the canned goods in their homes, and people would often give our family canned food gifts at Christmas. But somehow the actual canning never happened in my presence, and thus I grew up thinking it was some magical and complicated process that was beyond my mere mortal capabilities.

Then I became a stay-at-home mom and had time to investigate. Wow, somebody had been holding out on me.

Home canning is very easy. There are even more books and websites on home canning than there are on food dehydrating, so instead of covering the basics and typing recipes, I'm going to focus on helping you use your "mad canning skilz" to stretch your food budget and make life easier at the same time.

How do you decide whether to can your food or to dehydrate it? I choose dehydrating when I want to put up large volumes of individual ingredients without committing large volumes of storage space. I also dehydrate foods when I don't have the time to stand over them for processing. I choose canning when I want to put up convenience foods and prepared meal items. This allows me to stock the pantry with easy meals that are ready to go; I just have to open a jar and heat the food to meal temperatures.

Most people start with boiling water bath canning, which is basically putting jars of food in boiling water and keeping them there until the germs are killed and a vacuum has formed. This is a perfect means of preserving most fruits, including whole fruit, fruit slices or pieces, jams, jellies, etc. For this kind of canning you don't need any special equipment, just a couple of big pots and a way to elevate the jars.

But if you want to put up low-acid foods like veggies or meat, you must turn to pressure canning. That's not the same as pressure cooking; don't try to cut corners here by not using the right equipment. When putting food on your pantry shelf you need to be unshakably certain that when you open it months from now it will be safe to eat. Your life literally depends on this.

Follow all instructions in your manual for preparing your pressure canner for use. Follow the USDA guidelines for safe processing pressures and times.

Here are three scenarios for making home canning really work for you.



Dehydrated foods have the advantage of taking up very little space in the pantry.

Scenario #1: Chicken Big.

When you find chicken on sale for a song, buy two, or enough chicken pieces to equal two. Cook them for dinner as you desire — bake, roast, boil/poach, grill, etc. You can even use pre-cooked rotisserie chickens from the grocery (I have). Enjoy dinner.

After dinner, set out the slow cooker and some storage containers. Pull the cooked meat off the bones of one of the birds, putting the bones and skin directly into the slow cooker. Divide the meat into portions for making chicken salad, chicken casserole, etc. The number and size of portions you make will depend on the size of the birds and the number of people you need to feed.

From the second bird I cut off a few pieces to put in my husband Rudi's lunch. I pull the meat off this bird as well, but I set this carcass aside for future use.

Now, remember that bag of veggie trimmings in the freezer? Take out a big handful or two and put them in one of the net onion bags you saved. Tie the ends closed with string or rubber bands and put the bag in the slow cooker with the bones and skin. Add a couple of bay leaves and a few whole peppercorns, cover with as much water as you can, then turn the slow cooker on and leave it overnight.

Meanwhile, put the second carcass and some of the meat portions in the freezer (if you

cut off whole pieces, put them in the freezer too). Put other portions in the fridge.

Have a good night's sleep.

In the morning while waiting for your coffee to brew, strain your broth from the slow cooker into a big container and put it in the fridge to cool. Put the cooked-down veggies in the blender and puree, then put them on a tray in the dehydrator and make a veggie powder for future meals. Wrap the bones well for the trash so no animals get into them and choke (or pressure cook until the bones are soft enough to be mashed, dehydrate, and voila — bone meal for the garden).

That evening, set up your pressure canner and get your jars and lids ready. While the canner is heating up, skim the fat from your chicken broth.

Put the stock and some of the meat from the fridge, chopped, on the stove and heat them to boiling. The whole thing needs to boil for about five minutes to make sure each piece of meat is thoroughly hot to its center. Ladle the stock with some meat into your cans, put the lids on, put them in the canner, then process according to the instructions for your canner and the USDA recommendations for canning in your area.

Afterward, once everything is cool and you've confirmed you have a good seal on the jars, wipe them clean and put them in the pantry. When it's time to make soup, just add a handful of veggies from your dehydrated stash, heat everything up until the veggies are plump and hot, and ladle the mixture over cooked rice or noodles.

Repeat the whole process with the second carcass when you have time or energy. As long as it is in the freezer, it will keep until you are ready, and you don't even have to thaw it first.

The total amount of food you will have when done with this process will depend on the size of your birds, and to some extent on the size of the crock pot you use, but my totals most recently were: 12 pint jars of chicken soup (if you don't want or need 12 jars of soup you can always just put up plain stock), eight servings of chicken casserole, four servings of chicken salad (I probably could have made this go further if I'd cut the meat pieces smaller), two pieces of thigh and two legs to send with Rudi for lunch at work, and eight cups of shredded meat in the freezer for future use — enough for two more casseroles, a couple more chicken salads, and for adding to something like fried rice or green salads.

It sounds like a lot of work, but most of it is passive. The slow cooker runs while you're

sleeping; you just set a timer and check on it periodically, like putting something in the oven.

Two tips: Aromatics, herbs, and spices become more potent in storage, so go lightly. You can always add more, but you can't take it away once it's in.

Starches inhibit the canning process tremendously, so if you wish to serve your soups with rice or pasta, or you wish to thicken your stock or soup, do that when you open the cans for making your meal.



If you're already chopping vegetables and filling jars, chopping and filling a few more only takes a little more time because you're already set up for it. But small batch preserving might be right up your alley and having a few jars of this and that is a great way to start building up a good pantry.

Scenario #2: There's the beef.

Now here's the way to get the most — and I'm not kidding — from a ground beef wind-fall. Let's assume you've gotten a great deal and purchased 10 pounds of hamburger.

Usually, the first step in any ground beef recipe is "brown the meat." Do you know how long it takes to brown that much ground meat? So we're going to cut some corners. I guarantee you won't notice the difference.

Start with your 10 pounds of ground meat (which can be a mix of meats if you prefer). Put it all in a big stock pot, cover with as much water as you can reasonably put in the pot, plus a net onion bag full of veggie trimmings and a few herbs. Then boil. You heard me. Boil. Stir it from time to time and break up the meat as you do. Boil it as long as you can stand it. Eventually you'll look at it and think, "hmmm, that looks done." At that point, take it off the stove and let it cool down a bit, then put it in the fridge to cool completely.

I recommend boiling the meat instead of browning because it not only saves time, but you will end up with broth. You don't get broth when you brown meat, at least not without adding another time-consuming step. Since you're going to season this meat later, it doesn't matter that you boiled it. The seasoning gives it the characteristic flavor of the dish in question, and you have converted both the broth and the meat to very low-fat foods.

If you do this process late in the afternoon you can take some of the meat for dinner — tacos, sloppy joes — use your imagination. After that, put the pot of cooked meat in the fridge overnight. Now you get to sleep through the whole cooling process.

When it's cool, skim the fat off the top of the broth. Strain out the ground meat and set it aside (covered and in the fridge is good). Reheat the broth to boiling, ladle it into jars, and process it in your pressure canner according to the manual and the USDA instructions for processing meat broth.

While the jars are in the canner you can start working on the meat. Divide the cooked ground meat into portions that are the right size for your family's needs. Season each portion according to the kinds of meals you want to serve. I do some with taco seasoning, some with sloppy joe seasoning, and I leave some unseasoned to use in spaghetti sauce or shepherd's pie.

When the broth comes out of the canner you can process your jars of meat. They can all go in the canner together because they all have the same processing time. Again, follow all instructions for safe ground beef processing.

When everything is cooled and you've confirmed that the seals are good, you are ready to tuck your precious jars into the pantry.

Your finished amounts will depend on the size of the portions you created and the

amount of water you used to make your broth. For my family, this process yields: eight pints of broth, two dozen tacos, six sloppy joe sandwiches, six spaghetti servings, and two big pots of chili (more than two dozen servings).

The meat you left unseasoned can be used for so much more than just spaghetti sauce. Pull it out when you want to make quick stuffed peppers or cabbage rolls. Make your own Hamburger Helper meals or a Tex-Mex salad. Ground meat is pretty flexible and having it already cooked makes dinner a breeze.

The seasoned beef is plenty versatile too. Use your taco meat mix for nachos or burritos or empanadas. Use spaghetti sauce for lasagna. Use sloppy joe mix for dressing up baked potatoes or in lettuce wraps.

Tip: Remember the beef fat you skimmed off? You can use a little of that when you heat up the meat prior to seasoning; it adds back that little bit of browning that some people miss.

You can do this same scenario with non-ground meat — you simply adjust the processing time according to what you're canning, and of course season the meats according to the meals you think you would like to make.



I grew up thinking canning was some magical and complicated process that was beyond my mere mortal capabilities.

Scenario #3: Veggie madness.

We've all been there. Your garden went haywire and you have enough squash to feed the neighborhood. Or you found a roadside stand selling rhubarb for pennies.

To get the maximum food security benefit, just follow the directions for the kind of vegetable you want to can, and you're done — but really crank it up.

After every meal, put whatever leftover veggies you have into an appropriate canning jar and stash it in the freezer. When you've amassed enough jars to make one canner-load, take them all out and let them come to room temperature. (This is important! You don't want jars exploding inside your canner; that is not good eats.) Add enough boiling water to each jar to cover the vegetables.

Heat each jar until the contents boil. The time this takes will depend on what's in the jar. I use the microwave for this, but you can certainly dump each jar into a pot if you prefer.

Then set up your canner and process your foods. Use the time and pressure that is appropriate for the item that takes longest to process.

By doing it this way, you end up with a wide variety of prepared foods, ready to eat off the shelf, without the trouble of processing huge batches of any one thing at a time.

You can also can foods that you've fermented or brined, such as sauerkraut or pickles of all sorts. Again, process according to the instructions in your canner manual and the USDA instructions for processing vegetables.

Tips: Highly-seasoned foods can become very strong after canning, so plan to mix them with a batch of unseasoned items when you serve.

If you wish, you can mix different cooked veggies in the same jar, but you should not mix uncooked with cooked.

You can make your own baby foods by pureeing any appropriate veggies you have on hand and canning them. Use the cute little jelly jars with the quilted pattern on them and they make a fantastic gift for a new mother-to-be!

There you have it: three of the countless ways you can turn your pressure canning operation into a machine that fills your pantry without forcing you to quit your job to get it all done.

Finally, this is probably the most important tip I can offer on the subject of canning foods: use the most up-to-date sources of information and recipes you can find. Do not rely on old family cookbooks or methods handed down from your great-grandmother. Scientific research has determined the safest and most efficient methods for making your canned food safe to eat. I won't lecture too much on this, but I will remind you that botulism is serious and deadly.

Don't be afraid. Just follow directions. You can do it!

Online food dehydrating resources

Pick Your Own: This an awesome website for all kinds of food preservation info and advice. Try to look beyond the typeface—there is some good stuff here.

Dehydrate2store: has lots of videos and tons of recipes for using your dehydrated foods.

Drying Foods at Home: This document from the Purdue University Extension Office contains a wealth of information on choosing dehydrators, methods of using them, and ways to treat different foods for best results.

Read [Food security 101: part 2 - Convenience mixes make life easier](#).

Rowena Aldridge is a former professional ballerina who now spends her days homeschooling and homemaking. She is a certified educator in a number of old-school domestic skills, including food preservation (University of Georgia Extension), small space gardening (Square Foot Gardening Foundation), and patternmaking for sewing (Wild Ginger Software, Inc). She is the co-author of Digital Flat Pattern, the only college-level textbook on digital pattern drafting for the fashion industry. But her real passion is empowering others to go out and conquer the world on their own terms.

Learn more about her classes and other projects at www.romesticity.com.

Last issue we talked about some things you can do to stretch your food budget and make great use of every bit of food you buy. This article is full of convenience foods you can make yourself and keep on hand to make your life easier.

When I look at the things that are available in the stores to make cooking simpler and quicker, I see boxes and boxes of mixes filled with fat and sodium and devoid of vitamins and nutrients. When I look at the ingredient list, I see all kinds of words I can't pronounce. Then I look at the price — yikes!

So I've slowly been replacing the purchased mixes we use in our kitchen with homemade versions, and I've discovered that not only are the homemade versions tastier, they're cheaper. And because I'm in control of what exactly goes into them, I can at least control which unpronounceable ingredients I include.

Some of the ingredients called for in homemade mixes tend to make people cringe (powdered milk and bouillon granules, for instance). As an advocate of healthy eating, I sympathize, however the plain fact is that if you are struggling to put food on the table, whether due to financial strains or time constraints, these mixes will make it possible to feed everybody pretty well with minimal cost or effort at meal time. When making mixes at home, your final product will still be better for you and your family than something you could buy pre-made.

Sure, it takes time to assemble the mixes, and at first you will have to invest in some items that you haven't been keeping on hand, but in the end the total cost per individual mix will be so low that it won't be worth it to go back to the purchased mixes.

Tip: Don't try to replace everything at once. Just make note when you are running low on a mix that you normally keep, and plan to stock up on ingredients for making it yourself on your next shopping trip. This way you will only have to buy a few things at a time, and you'll only have to arrange for appropriate containment a bit at a time.

There are so many different recipes for various pantry mixes that you'll need to try a few to find which ones you like best. The following are ones I like, but you can certainly tweak them to suit your needs.

Baking mix: I use a recipe from [Hillbilly Housewife](#), which can be adapted for several different kinds of flour.

For all-purpose flour:

9 cups flour

1½ Tbsp. salt

¼ cup baking powder

2 cups solid vegetable shortening

For self-rising flour (which already has salt and baking powder in it):

10 cups flour

2 cups solid vegetable shortening

Either recipe will yield the same results; just use the one that best suits your ingredients.

Mix all dry ingredients first in a large bowl. Measure the shortening by packing it down and leveling the top with your finger or a kitchen knife. Add shortening to the flour mixture, then cut or knead the shortening into the flour. Mix until the texture is like lumpy cornmeal.

Store in a tightly-sealed canister or jar. Makes 11-12 cups of baking mix that you can use anywhere Bisquick is called for.

When making a baking mix, I prefer to use vegetable shortening because it doesn't have to be refrigerated.

One of my favorite ways to use this mix is to make tortillas. Simply combine one part water with four parts baking mix, knead until smooth, then tear off golf-ball sized pieces and roll them out thin on a floured surface. Toast the tortillas in a dry skillet for a few minutes until they are speckled brown. These store well in the freezer, but put pieces of waxed paper between them or they will stick together when they thaw.

Universal muffin mix: You'll find a variety of delicious muffins made with this mix at [GroupRecipes](#). Here's the basic mix recipe.

18 cups flour

5 cups sugar

2¼ cups dry buttermilk or nonfat dry milk powder

6 Tbsp. baking powder

2 Tbsp. baking soda

2 Tbsp. salt

2-3 Tbsp. ground cinnamon (to taste)

2-3 tsp. ground nutmeg (to taste)

Combine all ingredients and store in a jar or canister in a cool, dry place.

To make 24 regular-sized muffins preheat oven to 400° F. Coat muffin tins with cooking spray. In a large bowl beat 3-4 eggs, 3 tsp. vanilla, 2 cups water, and up to 1 cup of oil or butter. Stir in 5½ cups muffin mix and any additional ingredients (2 cups of fresh fruit, shredded vegetables, nuts, or flavored chips) just until moistened. The batter should be lumpy. Fill muffin tins and bake 18-20 minutes.

This is the only sweet-bread muffin mix I use now. Husband Rudi and daughter Ella particularly like the banana muffins made from this mix and I love lemon-poppy seed.

Muffins made from this mix also freeze well. Put them on a cookie sheet and let them freeze until the outside is frosty first. That way when you put them in a storage bag they won't stick together.

Pizza dough: Okay, this isn't really a make-ahead mix, but you can make a double batch and stash the second lump of dough in the freezer.

1 Tbsp. active dry yeast
1 cup warm water (105-115° F)
1 tsp. sugar
1 tsp. salt
2 Tbsp. vegetable oil
2½ cups flour

Dissolve yeast in water. Add the rest of the ingredients and mix. Dump onto a floured surface. Knead into a smooth dough (about five minutes), then roll out and press onto a greased pizza pan. Add your toppings then bake at 450° F for 12-15 minutes until the crust looks crispy and lightly browned.

For toppings, start a bag of leftover bits of this and that. Just label the bag and stash it with the dough in the freezer. When you find cheese on sale, shred enough for a pizza and put it in the bag, too!

Cream of anything soup mix: Here's another one from Hillbilly Housewife.

4 cups powdered milk
1½ cup cornstarch
½ cup instant chicken or vegetable bouillon granules
4 tsp. dried onion flakes
2 tsp. dried thyme

2 tsp dried basil, crushed
1 tsp. pepper

Measure all ingredients, mix together, and pour into an airtight container.

To use this, combine 1/3 cup of the mix with 1 cup of water. Heat at medium-low heat in a small saucepan until it starts to thicken. This will make the same amount as one can of soup.

Our family loves this so much more than the stuff from the store. Using the low-sodium bouillon makes it even healthier than the canned stuff. If you prefer, you can leave out the bouillon and replace it with your own homemade broth when you make the soup. It's also great for using in things like chicken casserole or green bean casserole.

Onion soup mix:

This one is also from Hillbilly Housewife.

¾ cup instant minced onion
1/3 cup beef bouillon powder
4 tsp. onion powder
¼ tsp. crushed celery seed
¼ tsp. sugar

Combine and store in an airtight container. Five tablespoons of the mix equals one package of store-bought onion soup mix.

This is another mix in which you can leave out the bouillon and instead add broth while you're cooking. I use this mix a lot in the crock pot, and it makes a great onion dip when stirred into some sour cream or plain yogurt.

Breading mix: I live in the south. Breading things is how we roll. This mix also makes a great addition to meatloaf or salmon patties. I have been known to cheat on the seasonings and just use an equivalent amount of Old Bay seasoning because I love that stuff.

2 cups bread crumbs
¼ cup flour
3 Tbsp. paprika
2 tsp. onion powder

4 tsp. salt
2 tsp. ground oregano
½ tsp. ground red pepper
½ tsp. garlic powder

Mix all ingredients and store in a sealed container.

To cook one chicken, cut up the bird and shake the pieces with about 2/3 of a cup of the breading mix in a plastic bag. Arrange on a baking sheet and cook in 400° F oven for 50 minutes or until the juices from the chicken run clear when pierced with a knife.

You can switch up the seasonings to suit your own tastes. I like the paprika and red pepper for the color and spiciness.

Taco seasoning: Taste of Home (tasteofhome.com) has a great taco seasoning recipe that is tasty on ground beef or chicken. It also works great to season beans for burritos. You can even mix it into plain yogurt to make a tasty dip!

8 tsp. dried minced onion
2 Tbsp. chili powder
2 tsp. cornstarch
2 tsp. garlic powder
2 tsp. ground cumin
1 tsp. dried oregano
¼ tsp. cayenne pepper

Combine ingredients well in a small bowl. Store in an airtight container. Yields six tablespoons, so you might want to double or triple the recipe for storage.

I usually use this for making chili, too, with the addition of my double-secret chili awesome-ifying ingredients: a heaping tablespoon of cinnamon powder and just a little unsweetened cocoa.

Ranch dressing mix: [The Anti-Housewife](#) has a great recipe for this. This mix works equally well for salad dressing, veggie dip, and as a delicious dressing for wrap sandwiches.

½ cup dried parsley
2 Tbsp. dried minced garlic

2 Tbsp. dried minced onion
1 Tbsp. dried dill weed
¼ cup onion powder
¼ cup garlic powder
1 Tbsp. salt (or less, to taste)
1 Tbsp. ground black pepper
½ tsp. red chili flakes

Pulse the parsley, garlic, and onion in a food processor. Add the other ingredients and continue processing in pulses. Store in a jar or canister.

To turn it into dressing, mix 1 tablespoon of mix with 1½ cups mayonnaise and ¾ cup cultured buttermilk. Whisk all ingredients together.

Hot cocoa mix: I always have this on hand during December, and I'm on standby to make it whenever our family watches *The Polar Express*.

4 cups instant nonfat dry milk
1½ to 2 cups powdered sugar
1 cup powdered non-dairy creamer
2/3 cup unsweetened cocoa
1 package of instant store-bought chocolate OR vanilla pudding mix (optional, but a tasty addition)

Whisk all ingredients together, then store in a canister or jar. Kids will like it with the full two cups of sugar. Grown-ups might like the addition of ¼ cup of instant coffee.

To turn it from mere mix into a steaming beverage to warm body and soul, place 1/3 cup of the mix in a mug, add boiling water, stir, and serve. Sometimes I dress this up by putting in a few chocolate chips or using a peppermint stick to stir it.

Russian tea mix: Ok, this is completely unhealthy and has all kinds of junk in it, but I love it. It reminds me of childhood and makes me feel like an astronaut. It also makes a great warm punch for big gatherings.

½ cup instant tea powder
2 cups Tang or other orange-flavored drink mix
3 oz. lemonade-flavor drink powder
¾ cup white sugar

½ tsp. ground cinnamon

½ tsp. ground allspice

¼ tsp. ground cloves

Mix all ingredients. Store in a jar or canister.

To prepare, just spoon two or three rounded teaspoons into a mug and add boiling water.

And there you have it. These are my basics. You'll know what your own basics are by looking in your pantry. There are so many mixes you can make at home that you will have plenty to keep you busy on these long winter nights.

[Next issue](#), I'll show you some of the ways I store our foods and show you why the vacuum sealer is my new best friend.

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Learn more about her classes and other projects at www.romesticity.com

In parts [one](#) and [two](#) (Issues #138 and #139), we covered basics and homemade convenience foods. Now that you've become so proficient at making delicious, nutritious, and economical foods for your family, how in the world are you going to store it all? How will you keep it from losing quality and going bad?

I do this by making frequent use of my FoodSaver® vacuum sealer. It's my BFF — best friend forever — when it comes to food storage.

We got ours years ago. Since then they've made many improvements, but the model we have does the job very well. If you can find one at a yard sale or on Craigslist, you can set yourself up to deal with every type of food storage need.

The customary way to use the vacuum sealer is to buy foods in bulk, then divide them into smaller portions for storage in the freezer. You can also vacuum seal cooked foods and pull them out later for reheating. All you need for this purpose is a roll of vacuum sealer bags and you're good to go.

What opened my eyes to the wider food storage possibilities of the vacuum sealer was learning about canning jar sealers. These little gadgets let you put food in ordinary canning jars and completely remove the air. You can create a vacuum-sealed jar right in your own home!

***Warning!** Vacuum sealing jars does not take the place of proper canning methods! The vacuum sealer has a specific purpose and place in the kitchen. When used appropriately, it will make your food storage efficient, useful, and even attractive. But don't try to use it to cut corners on food preservation. "Sorry" doesn't begin to express how you'll feel if you discover that your diligence and hard-earned money have been wasted on food that went bad from not being canned properly, or from seeing friends and loved ones become sick from eating foods you thought would nourish them.*



Let me give you an example of how vacuum-sealed canning jars can work for you. My homemade convenience mixes go into various canning jars, with the ingredients list and instructions for use right on the jars. These are relatively shelf-stable and require no extra work. No vacuum sealing for them.

But here's where the jar sealer makes itself indispensable as a frugal meal tool: You can prepare a week's worth of perishable salads, soups, and healthy snacks, prepare them at home in one session, place them in canning jars, then vacuum seal them for storage. Into the refrigerator they go.

For instance, I make complete salads and put everything in one jar: dressing first, then various veggies and other salad toppings (cherry tomatoes, onion slivers, bits of celery, cheese, etc.), then lettuce on top. This way the greens are separated from the dressing and remain crisp. I also vacuum seal fresh fruit and veggie crudité's, so when my daughter Ella opens the fridge and sees all the pretty jars of pretty food, it's an easy choice for her to pick something healthy rather than a cookie or a bag of chips.

But there's more to this story: By using the jar sealer to store perishables, I can extend their freshness by more than double. A head of ordinary lettuce can last up to two weeks when chopped and vacuum sealed in a jar, with no loss of quality. Cheese can go

months and still look, feel, and taste new. Even cooked foods keep longer when sealed in a jar, and that lets me use them in dishes up to a week later, making it feel like we're not eating the same meal over and over.

There are some things I don't vacuum seal. Items that get opened more than a few times a week just get regular lids or go into ziplock bags. It's easier that way, because they get used up well before they would go bad anyway.

Also, some things just do better without being sealed up tight — for example, bread crumbs, which I keep in a jar that has a muffin paper liner instead of a regular lid. After all, I want my breadcrumbs to stay stale.

Tips:

When sealing things in bags for the freezer, it is sometimes better to cut a much larger bag than needed. If I know I'll only use a small portion of something, I'll usually just put it into one big bag which then gets opened and resealed as things get used up. This saves on the number of bags I store and saves money on bags too. (Every time you open a bag, you have to cut off the part at the top where the old seal is, thus making the bag smaller. If you start with a bag that is already the right size for a serving, once you open it, it might be too small to use again for anything but scraps. But if you start with a bigger bag, you can keep closing it, losing only the little bit at the top that you cut off when you opened it.

Dehydrated foods will last nearly forever in a vacuum-sealed container. Put crushable dehydrated foods in jars, and non-crushables in bags. You don't have to freeze them, just put them on the shelf and admire your handiwork.

Oh yes — label everything! There are few things more demoralizing than the discovery that you used cream of something soup mix to make pancakes. I put the ingredient list right on the jar if it is big enough, and sometimes the instructions too.

When canning, you must use a new, unused lid for each jar, but when using the vacuum sealer with canning jars for meal storage you can use the same lid over and over. This is what I do with lids that have been removed from previously canned foods. When I get the time, energy, and materials to do it, I'm going to paint my lids with red chalkboard paint so I can use them as labels, too!

Extreme meal planning

Okay, maybe all this food drying, canning, and sealing is not for you. Maybe you just want some simple, painless, non-time-consuming ways to feed your family well and make your groceries go as far as they can. I get that, and in fact I lived that when I was still working outside the home.

But don't be fooled by finance guy Dave Ramsey's schtick about eating "beans and rice, rice and beans" to save money. Frugality doesn't mean doing without. It means using what you have well, so that what you have is enough. And you can do that right now, with very little effort.

There are several ways you can go about this. One is the planned-leftover method, which essentially means making a little more than needed for each meal and setting some of it aside for lunch the next day. I do this, and to make this more effective I load the lunch containers before serving the meal so that the needed portions are accounted for.

The next step along this continuum is what TV cook Sandra Lee calls "Round 2 Recipes." This means setting aside some of the ingredients while you are preparing your meal and using them for a different recipe the next day. I do this sometimes too. In fact, I even do this in reverse when I'm canning (setting aside some of the food I'm prepping for jars to use for that day's meal).

But the level I'm going to encourage you to shoot for is the one in which every morsel left in the pan at the end of a meal and every dab left at the bottom of a can and every drip at the end of a jar is assessed for its potential to become part of a new dish in a new meal. This is not as hard as it sounds; it just takes a little practice. To get you started, here are some of my favorite tips for turning what might be considered waste into nutritious, healthy, fun dishes and meals.

General ideas:

Set a jar or other container in the fridge and put in it any little bit of leftover veggies and cold meat — the last few olives in the jar, that half a boiled egg that you forgot to put in the lunch box, etc. When you have enough, chop them all up, mix with some vinaigrette and serve in a lettuce wrap (mix with a little mayo and some lemon juice and serve in a pita or mix with some salsa and serve rolled up in a tortilla).

Combine leftover rice or that one last corn muffin, some leftover chopped meat, that last

bit of onion or garlic, some herbs and seasoning, then stuff them in a hollowed-out tomato, sweet pepper (or heck, even a hot pepper if you like!), squash, zucchini, or eggplant. Then stand them in water or stock in a pan and heat in the oven until browned on top.

Croquettes can be made from just about anything. If you have meat or chicken or fish, chop it finely, add herbs and seasoning, an egg, and enough breadcrumbs/leftover rice/unsweetened cereal/plain oatmeal to hold it all together. Form into small patties, heat in a pan until browned, and serve with a sauce: gravy or tomato sauce/ketchup for meat, white sauce for chicken, soy sauce for fish. Offer them on a platter with some tartar or cucumber sauce and you have a fabulous brunch entrée!

Save leftover bits of fruit together in a jar in the fridge and when you have enough, make a fruit pot pie. You might not even need to add sugar — just thicken any juices with a little cornstarch on the stove, pour the whole thing into a prepared pie crust and bake. Or if you prefer, mix some crumbled graham crackers with a little butter and press them into the bottom of a pan, pour the fruit and thickened juice on top, and chill for a delicious mixed fruit tart.

This and that:

When you finish a jar of pickles, slice up some veggies and put them in the jar with the juice overnight — instant refrigerator pickled veggies!

You can also use the pickle juice to make a delicious salad dressing. Just mix three parts oil to one part pickle juice. Add a little sugar if it's too tart for your taste.

Stale cheese — the stuff that has gotten hard around the edges — can be grated and stored in a jar. Mix it with breadcrumbs to make a tasty casserole topping or sprinkle it on crackers and pop them in the oven to make an easy snack.

Speaking of breadcrumbs — save any piece of bread that's going stale, toast it, and crumble it into a jar. You can add Italian seasoning mix to make your own seasoned breadcrumbs. Mixing different breads makes a wonderful crumb that has more depth of flavor.

Save the juice from a can of stewed tomatoes to use for flavoring soups, stews, or stocks.

The same goes for the last tablespoon of mashed potatoes, which can be used to thicken a gravy or to make the sauce in the crock pot.

Don't slice a citrus fruit if you don't need an actual slice. Just poke a hole in the side to squeeze out some juice, then plug the hole with a piece of a toothpick. Save the slicing for when you really need the fruit.

I could go on, but there are so many great resources available elsewhere that I'll put some of my favorite links in a sidebar.

Food security

Food security means different things to different people. Some think of it as having enough to eat. Some feel it's knowing their food is of a certain level of quality. Some think of it as always being able to acquire food when they need it.

For me, it's knowing that we are prepared for many different situations — loss of work, loss of electricity, zombie apocalypse, whatever. It means making sure that every penny of our food budget goes as far as it can — that I honor the hard work my husband, Rudi, does to provide for our family by protecting the resources we have and using them to their fullest. This gives me peace of mind and self-confidence that helps me not panic when things get scary.

With that in mind, here are a few more tips that work for me:

Don't put all your eggs in one basket (or your squash, or your plums, or your beef stew). Having half an acre of veggies processed and in the freezer will not do you much good if the power goes out and all your food goes bad. Nor would your food security be enhanced by discovering that you had a canning failure on 20 pounds of beef.

This is why I recommend that you take the time to buy or preserve your foods in a variety of states, if possible. Freeze some uncooked, some prepared. Can some, dehydrate some. Store some as full meals and some as separate ingredients. Yes, it's more work, but



Using substitutes such as corn syrup and vegetable shortening, home economist Ida Lansden shows a group of Alexandria, Virginia, women how to bake the most succulent of sugarless, butterless cakes. (Source: Library of Congress)

it also grants peace of mind, not to mention the convenience of having a wider array of options available when planning and preparing meals.

Meat is a specialty item. I don't dehydrate meats for food storage because they don't last as long as meats that are properly canned or frozen. It's the fat that even very lean meat has to make it go rancid over time. At most, good home dehydrated jerky will last a few weeks without freezing. However, it does make a tasty, nutritious, lightweight food to carry for camping or a road trip, so I try to plan ahead and have some on hand for short-term needs.

It doesn't have to be all or nothing. The main reason people choose to put up big lots of a given food at one time is that it's more efficient. After all, if you're chopping vegetables and filling jars, chopping and filling a little more only takes a little more time because you're already set up for it. But small-batch preserving might be right up your alley, not to mention that having a few jars of this and that is a great way to start building up a good pantry.

It doesn't have to be all at once. Maybe the idea of big-scale preserving *does* appeal to you. Don't go overboard and burn out! Choose one thing, do that, repeat. You'll get into a groove and before you know it, you'll be looking for more places to stash your treasure.

The main thing is that you can take steps to make your family's menus inviting, delicious, and healthy. You can save money doing it. And you can find great satisfaction in it. I do, and you will too. Just start and you might be amazed at what you achieve.

Left Overs: How to Transform Them into Palatable and Wholesome Dishes

By Mrs. S. T. Rorer, 1898. This is the book that got me started down this road. Mrs. Rorer was a very practical woman with plenty of advice on the subject, and I've learned something useful in all her books, even the one on chafing dishes.

Foods That Will Win the War and How to Cook Them

By Goodies and Goudiss, 1918. Nobody does food like people under fire.

That's Not Trash, That's Dinner!

A New York Times article for those who want a few modern-day examples of using absolutely everything.

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(Read [part one](#) of this series in issue #138, November/December 2012 and [part two](#) in issue #139, January/February 2013.)