

THE **SANE** PREPPER

Prepared... WITHOUT the crazy!

Food In A Crisis

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FOOD IN A CRISIS

Water keeps you alive for three days. Food keeps you functional for the long haul. A household with a serious food reserve doesn't panic when the store shelves empty out. It doesn't make desperate decisions when roads close. It just keeps going. This section covers everything from building your first pantry to growing, preserving, hunting, and foraging your own food when the supply chain isn't an option.

EAT WHAT YOU STORE, STORE WHAT YOU EAT

Before we talk about what to store or how much, let's talk about the single biggest mistake people make with food preparedness: buying a bunch of stuff they'd never normally eat and calling it done.

Yukk!

There are households out there with five-gallon buckets of wheat berries, cases of freeze-dried stroganoff, and enough protein bars to outlast a geological era — none of which anyone in the house actually wants to eat. During a normal week, this stuff just sits there. During a crisis, when people are already stressed and uncomfortable, being handed unfamiliar food they don't enjoy makes everything worse. Kids especially will refuse to eat things they don't recognize, which is the last problem you need when everything else is falling apart.

The smarter approach is embarrassingly simple: store what you eat.

Look at what your household actually consumes in a normal week. Pasta, rice, canned tomatoes, peanut butter, oatmeal, canned beans, cooking oil, soup. Whatever it is — that's your food storage starting point. Buy more of it. Rotate it. Use the oldest, replace it with new. Your pantry becomes a living supply rather than a static museum of survival food nobody touches.

This approach has another major advantage:

You already know how to cook it. In a stressful situation, the last thing you want to be doing is figuring out how to cook unfamiliar ingredients over an unfamiliar heat source. Familiar food prepared the usual way — even if the heat source has changed — provides comfort as well as calories. That matters more than people realize.

The rotation habit is the other half of this equation.

First in, first out. When you bring new cans home, they go to the back. Oldest cans come forward and get used first. This isn't complicated. It just requires a few minutes of attention when you stock the shelves. Done consistently, you always have fresh stock and nothing ever expires forgotten in the back of a cabinet.

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One more thing: label everything with a purchase date if it doesn't have a clear expiration. A strip of masking tape and a marker takes ten seconds and saves a lot of guessing later.

Store what you eat. Eat what you store. Rotate consistently. That's the whole mindset in three sentences.

HOW MUCH FOOD DO YOU NEED?

The question of how much food to store is easier to answer than most people think, and harder to execute than most people plan for.

Start with calories.

An average adult needs roughly 2,000 calories per day to maintain basic function under normal activity levels. In an emergency where people are doing physical work — hauling water, clearing debris, keeping warm — that number goes up, sometimes significantly. Children need fewer calories than adults but require proportionally more protein and fat for healthy development. Elderly adults may need fewer calories but often need more protein to maintain muscle mass.

For planning purposes, use these rough daily targets:

Adults: 2,000 calories

Active adults or those doing heavy physical work: 2,500 to 3,000 calories

Children under 12: 1,200 to 1,800 calories depending on age and size

Elderly adults: 1,600 to 2,000 calories.

Do your math.

Multiply your household's daily calorie need by however many days you're planning for. A family of four adults planning for 30 days needs roughly 240,000 calories. That sounds like a lot until you realize a single pound of rice contains about 1,600 calories, a pound of dried beans about 1,500, and a pound of oats about 1,700. Calorie-dense staples go a long way.

Beyond calories, nutrition matters — especially over extended periods.

A diet of rice and nothing else will keep you alive but produce deficiency symptoms within weeks. The nutrients most at risk in a long-term emergency diet are Vitamin C (found in fruits and vegetables, which are often the first to disappear from storage), Vitamin D (normally produced by sun exposure, which may be reduced in a shelter-in-place situation), and essential fats.

Practical nutritional coverage for a long-term food supply:

Protein: dried beans, lentils, canned meat, peanut butter, nuts, dried eggs

Fats: cooking oil, peanut butter, nuts, canned fish

Carbohydrates: rice, pasta, oats, flour, crackers

Vitamins and minerals: canned and freeze-dried vegetables and fruits, multivitamin supplements as insurance

Multivitamins are worth storing specifically as nutritional insurance.

They're cheap, lightweight, and take up almost no space. A daily multivitamin covers most deficiency risks during a period when your diet may be limited.

Special diets deserve specific attention in your planning.

A household member with diabetes needs to manage carbohydrate intake even in an emergency — storing plenty of protein and fat sources matters more for them than loading up on rice. Someone with celiac disease needs gluten-free staples. An infant needs formula if not breastfed. A household member on a medically restricted diet needs that restriction honored in the emergency food plan, not ignored.

Plan for real people eating real food under real conditions. T

he calories-per-day math gives you the baseline. Common sense about nutrition and individual needs fills in the rest.

SHORT-TERM FOOD STORAGE

Two weeks is the minimum. Three months is where you start feeling genuinely comfortable. The difference between those two goals is mostly a matter of shelf space and gradual accumulation — not a dramatic leap in complexity or cost.

The two-week supply is your foundation.

It protects against the scenarios most households will actually face: a serious storm that makes roads impassable, a power outage that disrupts normal shopping, a supply chain hiccup that empties certain shelves. Two weeks gives you enough breathing room to wait out almost any short-term disruption without leaving the house.

Building it is straightforward.

Start by making a list of what your household eats in a normal week — actual meals, not aspirational ones. Multiply the ingredients by two. That's your two-week supply in rough outline. Buy it gradually over the course of a few shopping trips. Store it sensibly. Done.

Foundations

The foods that form the backbone of a short-term storage pantry are the same foods that form the backbone of most households' normal eating:

Canned goods:

Vegetables, fruits, beans, tomatoes, soups, and canned meats. Canned goods typically last two to five years under good storage conditions. Buy what you eat. Date them if they don't have a clear expiration. Rotate consistently.

Pasta and rice:

Dense, cheap, familiar, and stores easily. A pound of pasta costs almost nothing, lasts years in a sealed container, and provides roughly 1,600 calories. Hard to beat.

Peanut butter and nut butters:

Calorie-dense, protein-rich, requires no refrigeration, needs no cooking. One of the most efficient emergency foods available.

Crackers and shelf-stable breads:

Useful when cooking isn't convenient, and provides variety that matters more than people expect over an extended period.

Cooking oil:

Calories and fat, both of which become important when diet options narrow. Store what you normally cook with.

Sugar, salt, and honey:

Besides their obvious uses, these are important preservatives. Honey has essentially indefinite shelf life stored properly.

Coffee, tea, and comfort items:

This gets overlooked in purely caloric planning and it shouldn't be. Morale is a real factor in extended emergencies. Familiar beverages, comfort foods, and small treats make difficult situations significantly more manageable.

Multiply by 3:

To go from two weeks to three months, you're essentially doing the same thing three times over — but taking it slowly, building it over several months, and paying attention to what your household actually uses and rotates through. Don't try to do it in a weekend. A shopping trip or two per month with an eye toward the pantry builds a three-month supply faster than most people expect.

LONG-TERM FOOD STORAGE — SIX MONTHS TO ONE YEAR AND BEYOND

Once you're past three months, you're in long-term storage territory. The rules change a bit, the foods change a bit, and the storage requirements get more specific.

Long-term storage is built around staple foods that remain safe and nutritious for years — sometimes decades — when stored correctly. The enemies of long-term food storage are heat, moisture, oxygen, light, and pests. Control those five factors and most staple foods last far longer than most people realize.

The core long-term staples:

White rice stored in sealed containers with oxygen absorbers lasts 25 to 30 years. Brown rice, despite being nutritionally superior, only lasts about six months to a year because of its oil content — the oils go rancid. For long-term storage, white rice wins.

Dried beans and lentils:

These last 25 to 30 years in sealed containers. Nutritionally excellent — protein, fiber, complex carbohydrates. Note that very old beans (10+ years) may not soften properly when cooked even if still safe, so rotating through your supply every few years is good practice.

Oats:

(Rolled or steel-cut) last five years or more properly stored, up to 30 years in sealed mylar with oxygen absorbers. One of the most nutritionally complete grains.

Wheat berries:

(Whole wheat grain) last 25 to 30 years sealed. Require a grain mill to convert to flour — if you're storing wheat berries, store a hand-cranked grain mill too. Otherwise they're just decoration.

TEN years!

White flour lasts one to two years at room temperature, up to ten years vacuum-sealed. More practical than wheat berries for most households that don't have a grain mill.

Forever?

Sugar lasts indefinitely if kept dry and sealed. Salt lasts indefinitely period — it doesn't go bad. Honey lasts indefinitely sealed. These three are worth storing in meaningful quantities.

Dry milk;

It lasts two to ten years depending on packaging and storage conditions. Useful for cooking and as a protein and calcium source when fresh dairy isn't available.

Freeze-dried foods deserve mention separately.

Commercially freeze-dried fruits, vegetables, and meats can last 25 to 30 years sealed, retain most of their nutritional value, and rehydrate to a reasonable approximation of the original food. They're expensive compared to bulk staples — but for fruits and vegetables in particular, where long-term storage options are otherwise limited, freeze-dried is worth the cost.

The packaging matters as much as the food.

Mylar bags with oxygen absorbers inside food-grade buckets are the gold standard for bulk staple storage. The mylar blocks light and moisture; the oxygen absorbers eliminate the oxygen that causes oxidation and supports insect life; the bucket provides physical protection. This combination is what allows rice and beans to last decades rather than years.

Store in a cool, dark location.

Temperature is the single biggest factor in storage life — every 10-degree reduction in temperature roughly doubles shelf life. A basement storing food at 60°F will preserve it dramatically longer than a garage that reaches 90°F in summer.

One final point:

Store what you know how to cook. A bucket of wheat berries is worthless without a mill. Freeze-dried vegetables are useful only if you know how to incorporate them into actual meals. Long-term storage works best when it's built by people who've thought through how they'll actually use it.

THE PANTRY APPROACH — BUILDING A WORKING STOCKPILE

Here's the practical reality of building a food stockpile: it doesn't happen in one shopping trip and it shouldn't. The households with the strongest pantries built them gradually, consistently, over time — usually without any single dramatic gesture toward preparedness.

The pantry approach is simply this: always buy a little more than you need, and store the excess sensibly.

Every grocery trip is an opportunity. When pasta is on sale, buy six boxes instead of two. When canned tomatoes are cheap, buy a case. When peanut butter is at a good price, buy three jars instead of one. None of this requires a special trip to a survival supply store or a significant budget commitment in any single week. It's just buying ahead on things you'll use anyway.

Over a few months of this, a meaningful supply accumulates almost without effort. People are often surprised by how quickly it adds up when they're paying attention.

A few practical principles for building a working pantry:

Buy on sale, buy in bulk when practical. The per-unit price of most shelf-stable foods drops significantly when bought in larger quantities. A case of canned beans costs less per can than individual cans. A 25-pound bag of rice costs less per pound than five 5-pound bags. This is not preparedness spending — it's just efficient grocery shopping.

Organize for rotation, not just storage.

Food you can't find or access easily doesn't get rotated. Canned goods should be stored so you can pull from the front and restock from the back without gymnastics. Label shelves. Know what's where.

Track what you use.

The pantry that works is the pantry that reflects your actual eating patterns. If you bought twelve cans of a soup nobody likes, that's twelve cans that won't get rotated and will eventually expire untouched. Stick to what your household actually eats.

Don't neglect the non-food pantry items.

Toiletries, paper products, cleaning supplies, over-the-counter medications, batteries — these all benefit from the same surplus-buying approach. A household that runs out of toilet paper or ibuprofen during an extended emergency has a different kind of problem than food shortage, but it's still a problem.

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Set a goal and work toward it methodically.

Two weeks, then one month, then three months. Each milestone is genuinely meaningful. Don't wait until you've reached the final goal to feel prepared — every step matters.

BULK STAPLES — RICE, BEANS, GRAINS, AND HOW TO STORE THEM

The backbone of any serious food storage program is bulk staples. These are the foods that provide the most calories per dollar, store the longest per pound, and form the foundation of a genuine long-term food supply. They're also, frankly, some of the most boring foods on the planet eaten alone — which is why Section 3.1 emphasized storing variety and flavor alongside them.

Here's what you need to know about the major bulk staples:

Rice: white rice is the workhorse of long-term food storage. Cheap, calorie-dense (roughly 1,600 calories per pound), familiar, and incredibly versatile. Store in mylar bags with oxygen absorbers inside food-grade buckets. Stored this way it lasts 25 to 30 years. Buy in 25 or 50-pound bags from restaurant supply stores, warehouse clubs, or Asian grocery stores for the best price per pound.

Dried beans:

The protein complement to rice. Together, rice and beans provide a nutritionally complete protein profile — each contains amino acids the other lacks. Store the same way as rice. Rotate every few years for best cooking results. Lentils and split peas cook faster than whole beans and don't require soaking — useful when fuel is limited.

Oats:

Rolled oats or steel-cut oats are nutritional powerhouses — complex carbohydrates, fiber, protein, and fat. They can be eaten hot or cold, require minimal cooking, and work in dozens of recipes beyond oatmeal. Store in mylar with oxygen absorbers. Shelf life up to 30 years properly stored.

Pasta:

Not quite as long-lived as rice and beans (three to five years under normal conditions, longer vacuum-sealed) but extremely practical because it's what most households already eat. The variety matters — having different shapes and sizes adds meal variety that becomes psychologically important over extended periods.

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Flour:

All-purpose white flour lasts one to two years stored in a cool dry place, longer vacuum-sealed. Enables baking, which matters enormously for morale. Store with baking powder, baking soda, yeast (in the freezer), and salt.

Cornmeal:

stores similarly to flour, provides variety, and enables cornbread, polenta, and other practical staples. Store in sealed containers.

Sugar:

Refined white sugar stored in sealed containers lasts indefinitely. Provides calories, enables baking and preserving, and improves the palatability of almost everything. Store more than you think you'll need.

Salt:

Essential for flavor, preservation, and electrolyte balance. Lasts indefinitely. Store generously — it's cheap and weighs almost nothing relative to its importance.

Cooking oil:**Vegetable oil, olive oil, coconut oil.**

Fats are essential calories and flavor carriers. Shelf life varies — coconut oil lasts longest (two to five years), vegetable oils one to two years. Store in a cool dark place and rotate. Shortening in sealed cans lasts eight to ten years.

Spices and seasonings:

Technically not bulk staples, but practically essential. A diet of plain rice and beans is survivable. A diet of rice and beans seasoned with garlic, cumin, chili powder, oregano, and salt is actually pleasant. Spices have a long shelf life in sealed containers and transform limited ingredients into actual meals. Don't neglect them.

The storage method for all of these is the same: sealed container, cool dark location, away from moisture and pests. For anything stored more than a year, mylar bags with oxygen absorbers inside food-grade buckets is the reliable standard.

FREEZE-DRIED AND DEHYDRATED FOOD

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The preparedness market is full of expensive freeze-dried food products, and it can be hard to sort out what's genuinely useful from what's just effective marketing. Here's an honest assessment.

First, the difference between freeze-dried and dehydrated:

Dehydrated food has had its moisture removed through heat. It's lighter than fresh food, lasts longer than fresh food, and costs less to produce than freeze-dried food. The tradeoff is that dehydration causes some nutrient loss, changes texture significantly, and results in a product that doesn't fully rehydrate to its original quality. Dehydrated apples taste like dried apples, not fresh apples.

Freeze-dried food is subjected to very low temperatures and then to a vacuum that pulls moisture out as vapor. This process preserves structure, color, flavor, and nutrients far better than dehydration. Freeze-dried strawberries look like strawberries, taste like strawberries, and rehydrate to something reasonably close to fresh strawberries. The tradeoff is cost — freeze-drying is more expensive to produce and the products reflect that.

What's genuinely worth buying freeze-dried:

Fruits and vegetables are where freeze-dried really earns its price premium. These are the hardest foods to store long-term through other methods, and the nutritional and variety value they provide in a long-term storage diet is significant. A can of freeze-dried spinach, strawberries, or sweet corn sitting in your storage adds real nutritional diversity that dried beans and rice can't provide.

Meats are a mixed bag.

Freeze-dried chicken, beef, and fish exist and work, but they're expensive and the quality varies. Canned meats — tuna, chicken, salmon, sardines — provide most of the same practical value at a fraction of the cost. For most households, canned meats are the better choice.

Complete meals from brands like Mountain House, Wise, and Augason Farms are convenient and genuinely palatable, but they're expensive per calorie and tend toward high sodium content. They're useful for go-bags and 72-hour kits where convenience and weight matter. For home storage, building meals from components is far more cost-effective.

What's not worth premium prices:

Specialty survival food kits marketed on total calorie counts often don't hold up under scrutiny. A 30-day food supply advertised at 1,200 calories per day is a 30-day starvation diet, not a 30-day food supply. Read the actual calorie counts before buying.

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Plain dehydrated staples — oats, beans, pasta — from specialty survival suppliers cost several times more than the same food bought at a grocery or warehouse store. There's no reason to pay the premium.

The practical bottom line:

Use freeze-dried fruits and vegetables to add nutritional variety and shelf life to a storage program built primarily on bulk staples and canned goods. Don't build your entire food storage strategy around expensive freeze-dried complete meals. The math doesn't work.

CANNING — WATER BATH AND PRESSURE CANNING BASICS

Home canning is one of the most practical food preservation skills a household can develop. It converts garden surplus, bulk purchases, and seasonal abundance into shelf-stable food that lasts a year or more — and it produces food you actually want to eat, made the way your household likes it, without the preservatives and sodium levels of commercial canned goods.

There are two methods, and choosing the wrong one for a given food is not just a quality issue — it's a safety issue.

Water bath canning is used for high-acid foods.

The high acid content inhibits the growth of *Clostridium botulinum*, the bacterium that produces botulism toxin. Water bath canning processes food at 212°F — the boiling point of water — which is sufficient for high-acid foods.

High-acid foods safe for water bath canning include:

Fruits and fruit products (jams, jellies, preserves, pie fillings), pickles and pickled vegetables, tomatoes with added acid (lemon juice or citric acid), and salsa made with sufficient acid content.

You need:

A large pot deep enough to submerge jars by at least an inch of water, canning jars with new lids, and a jar lifter. The process is straightforward — fill jars with prepared food, wipe rims, apply lids and rings, process in boiling water for the time specified in the recipe, and allow to cool. Properly sealed jars (you'll hear the "pop" as they seal) are shelf-stable for a year or more.

Pressure canning is used for low-acid foods.

Low-acid foods can harbor *Clostridium botulinum* spores that survive boiling temperatures. Pressure canning reaches 240°F under pressure — high enough to destroy the spores. Skipping the pressure canner for low-acid foods is genuinely dangerous.

Low-acid foods requiring pressure canning:

Vegetables (green beans, corn, carrots, potatoes), meats and poultry, fish, soups, stews, and beans.

You need: a pressure canner — not a pressure cooker.

Although some pressure cookers are rated for canning. Check the manufacturer's specifications. The process involves loading the canner with jars and water, bringing it to pressure, maintaining pressure for the specified time, and allowing it to depressurize naturally before opening.

The most important rule in home canning:

Always use tested, approved recipes from reliable sources — the USDA Complete Guide to Home Canning, the Ball Blue Book, or the National Center for Home Food Preservation. These recipes have been tested to ensure adequate acid levels and processing times for safety. Don't improvise recipes for canning. The consequences of getting it wrong range from spoiled food to botulism, which is life-threatening.

Home canning has a learning curve.

But it's not difficult once the fundamentals are clear. Start with water bath canning of jams or pickles — forgiving, easy to learn, and produces results people actually enjoy. Move to pressure canning when you're comfortable with the process and have a pressure canner.

DEHYDRATING FOOD AT HOME

A home food dehydrator is one of the most useful preparedness tools you can own. It's also one of the more affordable ones — a decent dehydrator runs \$50 to \$150 and lasts for years. The learning curve is gentle and the results are immediately practical.

Dehydration removes moisture from food, which inhibits bacterial growth and extends shelf life dramatically. Properly dehydrated food stored in sealed containers lasts months to years depending on the food and storage conditions.

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What dehydrates well:

Fruits:

Apples, bananas, strawberries, blueberries, mangoes, peaches, grapes (into raisins), and citrus slices all dehydrate well. Slice evenly, dehydrate at 135°F until leathery with no moisture pockets. Store in airtight containers.

Vegetables:

Tomatoes, peppers, mushrooms, onions, zucchini, carrots, and green beans all dehydrate effectively. Blanch most vegetables briefly before dehydrating to preserve color and nutrients. Dehydrate at 125°F until crisp. Vegetables can be powdered in a blender — tomato powder, onion powder, and mushroom powder are all useful pantry additions.

Meats:

Jerky is the most common dehydrated meat product and is straightforward to make at home. Use lean cuts (fat doesn't dehydrate and goes rancid). Marinate the meat, then dehydrate at 160°F for beef, 165°F for poultry. Homemade jerky lasts one to two months at room temperature, longer refrigerated or vacuum-sealed. Canned meats last longer with less effort — jerky is about variety and enjoyment more than long-term storage efficiency.

Herbs:

The most underrated use of a dehydrator. Fresh herbs from a garden or farmers market dehydrate at low temperatures (95°F) in a couple of hours and produce a product far superior to store-bought dried herbs. Basil, oregano, thyme, rosemary, parsley, chives — all dry beautifully.

What doesn't dehydrate well:

High-fat foods (cheese, full-fat dairy, fatty meats) don't dehydrate safely for long-term storage. High-sugar foods can become sticky and don't store well. Foods with very high water content (lettuce, watermelon, cucumber) aren't worth the effort.

A dehydrator also enables making your own soup mixes, instant oatmeal mixes, and trail mix components — all useful additions to a food storage program.

COOKING WITHOUT POWER — CAMP STOVES, ROCKET STOVES, OPEN FIRE

When the power goes out, the kitchen doesn't have to shut down. But it does have to change.

The first and most important rule:

Never use outdoor cooking equipment indoors. This includes charcoal grills, propane camp stoves, gas grills, and wood fires. Carbon monoxide from combustion is odorless, colorless, and deadly. It kills people every year during power outages because someone decided to bring a grill into the garage or screened porch. Outdoors only. Even a partially enclosed space can accumulate dangerous concentrations.

With that clear, here are the practical options:

Propane camp stoves are the most practical emergency cooking tool for most households. A two-burner propane camp stove handles virtually any normal cooking task — boiling water, heating canned food, cooking rice, frying, making soup. They're reliable, easy to use, and the fuel stores well. A standard 1-pound propane cylinder runs a burner for about an hour on high. Store several. A larger 20-pound propane tank with an adapter hose gives you far more capacity.

Gas grills:

Most households already own one. Use it. It handles cooking tasks easily and most people already know how to use it. Check your propane level before an emergency season — you don't want to discover you're out of gas when you need it.

Charcoal grills:

Slower and less convenient than propane, but charcoal stores indefinitely and provides a backup when propane runs out. A bag of charcoal tucked in the garage costs almost nothing. A chimney starter eliminates the need for lighter fluid.

Rocket stoves:

A rocket stove is a small, efficient combustion device that burns small pieces of wood — sticks, scrap wood, pine cones — with surprisingly little fuel and produces a very hot, concentrated flame. The design (a small fuel magazine feeds a horizontal burning chamber that vents vertically) creates a draft that produces efficient combustion. Commercial rocket stoves cost \$30 to \$150. DIY versions can be built from concrete blocks or bricks for almost nothing. Very useful in a situation where propane runs out but wood is available.

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Open fire cooking:

This requires more skill than stove cooking but is the ultimate backup when nothing else is available. The key is fire management — cooking over coals, not flames. A roaring fire is hard to cook over; a bed of coals is consistent and controllable. Useful cooking methods over open fire include Dutch oven cooking (extremely versatile — baking, stewing, frying all possible), foil packet cooking, and spit or grate roasting.

Solar cooking:

A solar oven is a box with a reflective lid that focuses sunlight to cooking temperatures. Slow, weather-dependent, and only works in full sun — but requires zero fuel. Temperatures inside a commercial solar oven reach 250 to 350°F in good sun, sufficient for baking, cooking grains, pasteurizing water, and slow cooking. Commercial units run \$50 to \$300. In a long-term fuel-scarce situation, a solar oven extends your cooking capacity significantly.

Know your options before you need them.

The household that has a camp stove, some stored propane, a bag of charcoal, and knows how to build a cooking fire has multiple layers of backup. That's the SANE Prepper approach to any problem.

COOKING FOR A CROWD — EXTENDED FAMILY AND GROUP SCENARIOS

Most emergency food planning is done at the household level. But emergencies have a way of concentrating people. Extended family shows up. Neighbors need help. Your planned two-week supply for four people suddenly needs to feed eight.

Planning for this scenario — even loosely — is worthwhile.

The practical approach is to plan your food storage for slightly more people than currently live in your household. If you have four people, plan for six. If you have two, plan for four. This doesn't cost dramatically more, doesn't require much more space, and provides a meaningful buffer when unexpected guests arrive — as they reliably do in serious emergencies.

Large-batch cooking is a different skill than cooking for four. A few practical adjustments:

Cooking in a Dutch oven or large pot becomes the norm. A 12-quart stock pot can produce soup or stew for ten to twelve people at once. A large Dutch oven handles baking for a group. Have equipment that scales with your potential group size.

Simple recipes that stretch become more important than elaborate ones.

A pot of beans and rice with aromatics and seasoning feeds many people cheaply and satisfyingly. Bean soup. Vegetable stew. Chili. These are the dishes that make group cooking manageable.

Calorie density matters more for groups.

When you're feeding many people from limited supplies, you want the highest calories per unit of fuel and ingredient. Soups and stews are efficient. Elaborate multi-component meals are not.

Establish kitchen roles.

In a group situation, cooking without an organized process becomes chaotic. Someone plans the meals, someone manages the fire or stove, someone does prep, someone handles cleanup. This isn't military precision — it's just basic organization that keeps things functional.

Dietary restrictions and preferences become more complicated in groups. If you're hosting people whose food needs you don't know, having a range of simple options — something everyone can eat — matters more than having one elaborate meal. Keep it simple. Keep it filling.

FOOD SAFETY WHEN THE POWER GOES OUT

Food poisoning is a serious medical problem under normal circumstances. During an emergency, when access to medical care may be limited and your household is already under stress, it becomes significantly more dangerous. A little knowledge about food safety prevents a lot of suffering.

The core concept?

It's the temperature danger zone: bacteria multiply most rapidly between 40°F and 140°F. Food left in this range for more than two hours accumulates bacterial loads that can cause illness. The longer food stays in the danger zone, the greater the risk.

The refrigerator:

A closed refrigerator maintains food-safe temperatures for about four hours after power loss. A full refrigerator holds temperature longer than a half-empty one — the thermal mass of the food itself helps. Keep refrigerator doors closed as much as possible. Every opening releases cold air.

After four hours...

Perishable foods in the refrigerator should be used, cooked, or discarded. The priority order for using perishables: cook and eat foods that will spoil first (fresh meat, fish, dairy, cooked leftovers), then deal with longer-lasting items.

The freezer:

A fully loaded freezer holds safe temperatures for 48 hours with the door kept closed. A half-full freezer holds for about 24 hours. This is a significant window. If you know power will be out for more than 24 hours, options include dry ice (keeps the freezer cold significantly longer — about 2.5 to 3 pounds per cubic foot of freezer space per day), block ice added to the freezer, or moving food to a neighbor with power.

When in doubt, throw it out.

This rule is hard to follow when food feels expensive and wasting it feels wrong. But food poisoning in an emergency situation — when medical care may not be readily available — is a serious risk. The guideline: if a perishable food has been above 40°F for more than two hours, it should be discarded. If you can't be sure how long it was warm, discard it. The cost of replacing food is much lower than the cost of a household member seriously ill from food poisoning.

The foods that are fine without refrigeration:

Hard cheeses (waxed or vacuum-sealed), butter, whole fruits and vegetables (until cut), bread, crackers, peanut butter, shelf-stable condiments, canned goods, dried foods, and most baked goods. These don't need to be rushed or discarded.

Water and sanitation for food safety:

washing hands before handling food becomes more important, not less important, when running water is limited. Keep a container of sanitizing solution — one tablespoon of bleach per gallon of water — for sanitizing surfaces and utensils. Wash dishes in the most water-efficient way possible: a wash basin and a rinse basin, rather than running water.

GARDENING FOR FOOD SECURITY

A garden is the most sustainable long-term food production system available to most households. Unlike stored food, a productive garden renews itself every season. Unlike hunting or foraging, it's predictable and controllable. It also improves with attention — a garden that's been established and improved for three years produces dramatically more and better food than one planted for the first time.

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You don't need a farm. You need a plan.

Even a modest garden — 100 to 200 square feet, well-planned and well-tended — can produce a meaningful supplement to a household's food supply during the growing season. A serious garden of 1,000 square feet or more, managed intelligently, can produce a significant portion of a family's vegetable needs through the season and enough surplus for preservation.

The highest-value plants for a food security garden are those that provide the most calories and nutrition per square foot of space:

Potatoes and sweet potatoes:

Among the most calorie-dense vegetables available, and both produce significant yields in modest space. A 100-square-foot potato patch can produce 50 to 100 pounds of potatoes in a season. Easy to store without refrigeration for months.

Winter squash: butternut, acorn, hubbard.

These store for months without refrigeration, are calorie-dense, and are nutritionally rich. They take space but produce substantial yields.

Beans:

Bush beans and pole beans produce prolifically in small spaces, provide protein and fiber, and can be dried on the vine for long-term storage. A food security garden without beans is a missed opportunity.

Corn:

Calorie-dense and can be dried for long-term storage as dried corn or cornmeal. Requires more space than most vegetables but produces more calories per plant.

Tomatoes:

Arguably the most productive vegetable garden plant relative to effort. A single well-tended tomato plant produces 10 to 15 pounds of tomatoes in a season. Surplus can be canned, dehydrated, or made into sauce.

Leafy greens (kale, spinach, chard):

Extremely high in vitamins and minerals, fast-growing, and productive in small spaces. Kale especially is cold-tolerant and can be harvested for much of the year in most climates.

Garlic and onions:

Calorie-modest but enormously important for flavor — which, as noted above, matters more to long-term food sustainability than people give it credit for. Both store well.

The garden that matters most in a preparedness context isn't the one you plant after an emergency — it's the one you've already established. Start now. Learn your soil, your climate, and what works in your specific location. A garden takes years to optimize, and the skills it develops are genuinely irreplaceable.

SEED SAVING

Commercial seeds are convenient. They're also a dependency. Every year, the conventional gardener buys new seeds from a supplier — a supplier whose seeds may not be available in a supply disruption, a company whose stock may be out or delayed, or simply an annual expense that can be eliminated.

Seed saving severs that dependency. A household that saves seeds from open-pollinated, non-hybrid varieties of their most productive plants becomes self-sufficient in one of the most fundamental agricultural inputs there is.

The distinction between seed types matters:

Hybrid seeds:

(Often labeled F1) are bred by crossing two different parent plants to produce specific characteristics — higher yield, disease resistance, uniform size. They're excellent for production. But seeds saved from hybrid plants don't breed true — the next generation may look nothing like the parent. Don't try to save seeds from hybrid varieties.

Open-pollinated:

OP) and heirloom varieties breed true from seed. Plants grown from saved open-pollinated seeds produce plants that closely resemble the parent. These are the varieties worth saving.

The basics of seed saving:

Dry seeds:

(Beans, peas, corn, squash, tomatoes, peppers) are the easiest to save. Allow the fruit to fully mature on the plant — past the eating stage. Harvest, extract seeds, and dry thoroughly before storage.

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Wet seeds:

(Tomatoes, squash, cucumbers) benefit from a fermentation process that removes the germination-inhibiting gel coating and kills seed-borne diseases. Scoop seeds into water, let ferment for two to three days until the good seeds sink and mold forms on the surface, then rinse and dry.

Storage:

Seeds stored in a cool, dark, dry location in sealed containers — glass jars work well — maintain viability for several years. Adding a small silica gel packet to each jar reduces moisture. Freezing seeds in sealed containers extends viability dramatically.

Label everything!

Variety name, plant, and year saved. Unlabeled seeds are essentially useless once you've forgotten what they are.

Start by saving seeds from your most productive plants of varieties you know you love. Over several seasons you'll develop a seed stock adapted to your specific growing conditions — arguably more valuable than any commercial seed because it's been selected by your actual garden.

RAISING BACKYARD CHICKENS

Of all the livestock options available to a household with modest land, chickens offer the best return on investment by a significant margin. They're small, relatively inexpensive, easy to manage, and produce food — eggs, and eventually meat — continuously and reliably.

A small flock of six laying hens produces four to five eggs per day on average — roughly three dozen eggs per week. A household of four can supplement its diet meaningfully with that production, and surplus eggs are one of the most tradeable commodities in any community.

The basic requirements:

Space: chickens need a secure coop for sleeping and laying (about two to four square feet of coop space per bird) and a run or free-range area for daytime activity (at least ten square feet per bird in a run, more if free-ranging). A coop that protects against predators — foxes, raccoons, hawks, dogs — is the critical infrastructure. Predator-proofing means hardware cloth (not chicken wire, which predators can tear through), secure latches, and buried wire or an apron around the perimeter to prevent digging.

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Feed:

A flock of six hens consumes roughly 1.5 to 2 pounds of feed per day. Commercial layer feed is inexpensive and provides everything hens need. Free-ranging birds supplement their diet with insects, seeds, and plants, reducing feed consumption. Kitchen scraps — vegetables, grains, most table food — supplement well. Avoid feeding chickens raw potato peels, avocado, chocolate, onions, or anything moldy.

Water: chickens need continuous access to fresh water.

They drink more than people expect — about a pint per bird per day, more in hot weather.

Egg production:

Laying breeds (Rhode Island Reds, Plymouth Rocks, Australorps, Leghorns) produce more consistently than dual-purpose or meat breeds. Hens begin laying at five to six months of age and produce well for two to three years before production declines. Production drops significantly in winter when day length shortens — supplemental lighting in the coop extends winter production.

The learning curve for backyard chickens is genuinely gentle. T

They're hardy animals that require modest daily care — feeding, watering, checking for eggs, and occasionally cleaning the coop. Most chicken problems are manageable with basic knowledge and attention.

Check local ordinances before acquiring chickens. Many municipalities allow small flocks, but some restrict roosters (noisy), limit flock size, or require setbacks from property lines.

HUNTING, FISHING, AND FORAGING BASICS

Stored food and a garden provide the foundation of food security. Hunting, fishing, and foraging extend that foundation by adding protein, variety, and calorie sources that don't depend on stored supplies.

These are skills that take time to develop and can't be improvised effectively in a crisis. A person who has never fished can't suddenly become a productive fisherman when they need to. The value of these skills comes from developing them now, under non-emergency conditions, so they're reliable when they matter.

Hunting:

For meat production in a survival or extended emergency context, small game is more practical than large game for most people. Rabbits, squirrels, and birds are abundant in most of North America, can be taken with a .22 rifle or shotgun, and don't require the processing infrastructure that deer or larger game demands. A rabbit or squirrel provides a meaningful meal for a small family with minimal processing.

Deer hunting:

Where accessible, provides far more food per harvest — a dressed adult deer yields 50 to 100 pounds of meat. But deer hunting requires specific equipment, skills, and typically a license. If you're in an area with deer and have any interest in hunting, learning to hunt deer is one of the highest-value preparedness skills available.

All hunting requires licensing under normal conditions. Know your state's regulations, seasons, and licensing requirements.

Fishing:

Fishing is one of the most accessible protein sources available to most people in North America. Most states have abundant public fishing access, licensing is inexpensive, and basic equipment costs little. A simple rod and reel, a small tackle assortment, and knowledge of where fish are likely to be is enough to start catching food.

Skills that dramatically increase fishing effectiveness:

Knowing which baits and lures work for which species, understanding fish behavior in different seasons, and knowing where fish concentrate (structure, depth, current breaks). These come from practice and observation, not from buying better equipment.

For serious food production, trapping — using wire traps or fish traps — is more efficient than rod and line fishing because it works continuously without requiring your attention.

Foraging:

Wild edible plants exist in virtually every environment and provide genuine food value. The challenge is that wild plant identification requires solid knowledge — some edible plants have toxic look-alikes, and confidently knowing the difference requires learning from someone experienced or from detailed, illustrated references with multiple photos of each species.

The absolute rule of foraging? If you're not certain, don't eat it!

That said, a handful of highly recognizable wild edibles are worth learning first because they're abundant, unmistakable, and genuinely useful:

Dandelion:

The entire plant is edible. Young leaves in spring are mild and nutritious. Older leaves are bitter but edible. Roots can be roasted as a coffee substitute. Flowers are edible and can be made into fritters or wine.

Cattail:

Found near water throughout North America. Young shoots in spring taste like cucumber. Pollen in summer can be used as flour. Rhizomes contain starch that can be processed similarly to flour.

Wild berries:

Blackberries, raspberries, and blueberries are widespread, easily recognized, and highly nutritious. Learn to identify them in your region.

Nuts:

Acorns (require leaching to remove tannins), black walnuts, hickory nuts, and chestnuts are available seasonally in many regions and provide significant calories and fat.

A field guide specific to your region, combined with actual time spent outdoors learning to identify plants, is the foundation of safe foraging.

WILD EDIBLES — WHAT'S SAFE, WHAT'S NOT

Foraging for wild food gets a romantic treatment in a lot of preparedness content. The reality is more nuanced: wild edibles are genuinely valuable, but the knowledge required to use them safely is non-trivial, and the consequences of getting it wrong range from unpleasant to fatal.

This section covers the principles of safe foraging and expands on specific plant identification.

The Foundational Rules Of Safe Foraging:

Never eat anything you haven't positively identified. "Looks like" is not identification. "Probably is" is not identification. Positive identification means you can point to multiple identifying features — leaf shape, stem structure, flower form, smell, habitat — that together confirm the species without doubt.

Use multiple references.

A single field guide can have errors. Cross-reference identifications across two or three sources. Regional guides are more useful than general North American guides because they focus on what's actually in your area.

Learn the toxic look-alikes for anything you intend to forage.

Wild carrot (Queen Anne's Lace) looks similar to poison hemlock, which is deadly. Wild onion smells distinctly of onion; death camas, which is toxic, does not — smell is a reliable distinguishing feature here. Knowing both the target plant and its dangerous look-alikes is part of identification, not optional.

Start with unmistakable species.

Dandelions, cattails, blackberries, and black walnuts are among the most recognizable wild edibles with few dangerous look-alikes. Build confidence and knowledge with species like these before attempting more ambiguous identifications.

Learn in the field with an experienced guide.

Books and photographs are limited — a knowledgeable person who can show you the real plant in its real habitat teaches identification faster and more reliably than any written resource.

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Specific Plants Worth Knowing:

Pawpaw

Pawpaws are large native fruits that grow on small understory trees in river valleys and rich woodlands. The soft yellow flesh has a sweet, custard-like flavor often compared to banana, mango, or vanilla.

Edible parts include:

- ripe fruit flesh 🌿

The large seeds and skin are not eaten. Pawpaws are commonly eaten fresh or used in breads, puddings, ice cream, and desserts.



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Ramps

Ramps are wild onions with broad green leaves and a strong garlic-onion smell. They grow in moist forests in early spring, often forming thick patches on shaded forest floors.

Edible parts include:

- leaves
- stems
- bulbs 🌱

Ramps can be eaten raw or cooked and are often sautéed, grilled, or added to eggs, potatoes, soups, and pasta dishes.



Elderberries

Most elderberry plants you'll find in North America are:

- multi-stemmed bushes
- about 6 to 12 feet tall
- often growing along roadsides, creek banks, field edges, and sunny clearings

The berries grow in flat-topped clusters called umbels, usually hanging outward from the ends of branches.



Wood Sorrel

All above-ground parts of wood sorrel are edible. 🍃

That includes:

- the shamrock-shaped leaves
- the tender stems
- the small flowers
- the immature seed pods

The leaves are the part most commonly eaten. They have a crisp, tart lemon flavor that works well raw in salads, soups, or as a trail nibble.

Wood sorrel contains oxalic acid, the same compound found in spinach and rhubarb. Most people can safely eat moderate amounts, but large quantities aren't recommended, especially for people prone to kidney stones or certain kidney disorders.

Foragers usually treat it as a flavorful wild green rather than a bulk vegetable.



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Lambs Quarters

Lamb's quarters is a common wild green with soft, dusty-looking leaves and a flavor similar to spinach. It grows in gardens, fields, and disturbed soil, often reaching several feet tall.

Edible parts include:

- young leaves
- tender stems
- growing tips
- immature flower clusters



Miner's Lettuce

Miner's lettuce is a small, tender plant with round, cup-shaped leaves and a mild, fresh flavor. It grows in moist, shady areas and is commonly found in forests and along stream banks in early spring.

Edible parts include:

- leaves
- stems
- flowers
- seed pods



Purslane

Purslane is a low-growing succulent with smooth, round leaves and reddish stems. It has a mild, slightly tangy flavor and commonly grows in gardens, sidewalks, and disturbed soil.

Edible parts include:

- leaves
- stems
- flowers
- seed pods



Serviceberries

Serviceberries grow on shrubs or small trees and produce clusters of sweet purplish-red berries with a flavor similar to blueberries. They're commonly found along woodland edges, fence rows, and open forests.

Edible parts include the ripe berries.



Stinging Nettles

Stinging nettles are tall leafy plants covered with tiny hairs that can cause a sharp sting when touched. They grow in moist soil along creeks, fence rows, woodland edges, and shaded fields.

Edible parts include:

- young leaves
- tender upper stems 🌿

Always cook nettles before eating. Boiling, steaming, or sautéing removes the sting completely. They're commonly prepared like spinach and are excellent in soups, stews, omelets, and teas.



Plantain

Plantain is a common lawn weed with broad oval leaves marked by distinct parallel veins. It has a mild flavor and is often found in yards, trails, fields, and disturbed soil.

Edible parts include:

- young leaves
- seeds



Rose Hips

Rose hips are the bright red or orange fruit of wild rose plants. They appear in fall, often after the first frost, and are extremely high in Vitamin C with a tart, fruity flavor.

Edible parts include:

- outer fruit flesh

The seeds inside contain irritating hairs and are usually removed before eating. Rose hips are commonly used in teas, jams, syrups, and soups.



The investment required to become a competent forager is primarily time spent outdoors with good references. It's one of the most genuinely satisfying preparedness skills to develop, partly because it makes any outdoor environment look less hostile and more like a potential resource.

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