

The Pantry: Your Farmhouse Convenience Store

How to keep an organized, stocked kitchen pantry to minimize shopping trips and keep food costs low.

By Lisa Kivirist

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Perhaps fellow Laura Ingalls Wilder fans remember the final chapter in *These Happy Golden Years*, where she writes in blissful, descriptive detail about the pantry her new husband, Almanzo, built for her in their first home in South Dakota.

From the handy, built-in sugar drawers to empty space “for things to come,” this pantry signified the cozy core of farmhouse life and mission control for the kitchen.

Today’s modern pantry can continue to serve as the heart of today’s hobby-farm kitchen with a dash of thoughtful planning.

More than just cabinets stuffed with random dry goods, a well-thought-out pantry can save two of your most precious resources: time and money.

Think of the pantry as your farm’s on-site convenience store, efficiently stocked with the necessary basics to keep your daily meals and food duties humming along, from ample sugar for putting up strawberry jam to ingredients for a quick dessert for the neighbors’ impromptu visits.

Save time by eliminating those unplanned trips to town because you ran out of something and save fuel costs as well.

A well-stocked and organized pantry also helps trim your grocery budget. By always having basic staples on hand, you can readily make homemade—and healthier—versions of pricey, processed foods like hot cocoa or even sweetened condensed milk.

Despite all these glories, the pantry sometimes gets relegated to a low rank among kitchen priorities, often randomly stuffed with food until you can barely close the cabinet doors and don’t know what you have anymore.

Here are some easy tips to quickly and strategically organize and elevate your pantry to the master hub of your kitchen.

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Identify Your Pantry's Purpose

Name the key items you make all the time and structure your pantry around these core ingredients.

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Pantry checklist Not totally sure what basics to keep in your pantry? Check out Lisa Kivirist's Farm Pantry Checklist!

Between running a B&B on our farm and my love for baking, organic, unbleached white flour and sugar are two items I can never run out of.

Pantry purposes may change seasonally, particularly during the summer peak when you're constantly processing the abundant garden harvest.

I freeze loads of spinach and Swiss chard, which add up to a need for a lot of olive oil for the blanching process.

Every spring I visit a Greek grocery store when I'm in Chicago and buy several three-liter, metal containers of imported, extra-virgin olive oil, which aren't available in such a bulk size—and at such a good price—in my rural Wisconsin area.

I save both money and time by being able to process a season's worth of garden greens without running out of supplies.

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Buy in Bulk

Bulk items typically are pantry staples that can be ordered in larger-volume bags.

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Peppermint Biscotti

Ingredients 3/4 cup butter, softened (112 sticks) 3/4 cup sugar 3 eggs 2 tsp. peppermint extract 3 1/4 cups all-purpose flour 1 tsp. baking powder 1/4 tsp. salt 1 1/2 cups crushed peppermint candy, divided White chocolate bark for frosting

Preparation

In a large mixing bowl, cream butter and sugar together. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Beat in extract.

Separately, mix flour, baking powder and salt. Stir in 1 cup peppermint candy.

Gradually add flour/candy mixture to creamed mixture, beating until blended (dough will be stiff).

Divide dough in half. On ungreased baking sheet, roll each portion into a 12- by 21/2-inch rectangle.

Bake at 350 degrees F for 25 to 30 minutes or until golden brown. Carefully remove and place on wire rack. Cool for 15 minutes. On cutting board, cut diagonally into 1/2-inch slices.

Place cut side down on ungreased baking sheets. Bake 12 to 15 minutes until firm. For frosting, melt chocolate. Dip one end in chocolate and roll in the remaining candy.

Cool on wax paper.

Yield: Approximately 3 dozen biscotti.

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For example, I order my organic, unbleached flour in a 50-pound, bulk bag.

Items that are not available in bulk bags can often be ordered cheaper by the case, like boxes of tea.

Buying core items in bulk helps both your pocketbook and the planet. Not only do you save money over individual units, you use a lot less packaging and contribute less to the landfill. By purchasing bulk organic ingredients, the price is reduced significantly.

Local buying clubs and food co-ops tap into the buying power of a group pooling their resources to purchase bulk foods at close to wholesale prices.

A buying club usually starts at about five or six people to meet minimum order requirements and works through a local natural foods distributor to place a group order. (Look for a listing of food cooperatives near you.)

Another option is to ask your local grocery store to special order a bulk item or case for you, on which they may also be willing to give you a discount.

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Use It Up

For those of you like me, with squirreling instincts to pack away food, we need gentle reminders to use up what we stockpile.

This sounds like an obvious concept, but we've all accidentally bought something in duplicate or were forced to throw out expired food.

Despite today's rising food costs, the average American still unfortunately throws out approximately 15 percent of food purchased annually, adding up to over \$500 in wasted food.

One "game" our family plays to make sure we don't let pantry items linger too long is to "eat through" the pantry each winter.

After the December holidays, we try to go cold turkey on buying food, focusing on eating both the garden bounty we canned and froze in combination with everything in the pantry.

This gets us motivated to break into the more exotic impulse purchases we made that year—like grape leaves and quinoa—and forces us to think creatively with pantry ingredients, often leading to new favorite recipes.

One winter we realized we had accumulated a big, plastic bag filled with red-and-white peppermint candies acquired from restaurants and leftover holiday candy canes, which resulted in one of our now-favorite cookie recipes: peppermint biscotti.

Always keep in mind how much you actually use of something and buy accordingly. If a bulk bag is a great deal, but you know you won't use 50 pounds of rice in a year, consider splitting it with a friend.

I've learned to limit my dried herb and spice purchases.

I might save money buying the one-pound bag of bay leaves, but I know I only use a handful for some of my fall soup recipes.

Herbs and spices lose their flavor over time, and I'm better off buying just what I can use in one year and replacing it with fresh stock.

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Invest in Proper Storage

The challenge of purchasing in bulk is having a place to conveniently store the item once it comes out of the bulk bag.

Some easy pantry substitutions include: Don't have: Use instead: 1 ounce unsweetened chocolate 3 T. unsweetened cocoa plus 1 T. butter or vegetable oil 1 cup cake flour 1 cup all-purpose flour, remove 2 T. of the flour and add 2 T.

cornstarch 1 cup buttermilk A wee bit less than 1 cup fresh milk with 1 T. vinegar or lemon juice. Let sit 5 minutes (will curdle).

Going back to identifying your pantry's purpose, invest in accessible, quality storage containers for the bulk items you use most often. Look for containers made from high-grade, durable materials with tight-fitting lids.

With so many options available online and at retailers such as The Container Store, you can purchase the exact size you need to fit your kitchen.

While some of these containers may seem pricey, investing in something that makes your kitchen routines easier will quickly prove its worth. I had some dead space under a kitchen shelf that evolved into perfect storage for my flour, sugar and dried milk when I found sturdy, plastic bins that were just the right size to slide under that shelf.

Recycled glass containers work well as easy, frugal storage containers. Wide-mouth canning jars make it easy to access the ingredients as well as enable you to quickly identify what's inside.

Glass and metal containers deter mice as they're impossible to chew through.

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Pack in the Nutrients

Think nutrition when stocking your pantry: How can you get the biggest healthy bang for your buck—and allocated space? Dried beans, for example, deliver high protein, vitamins and minerals at a significant cost savings from canned or processed bean foods.

"Dried fruits rank high as an economical and convenient source of flavor, nutrients and fiber, especially if you grow or buy fresh fruit in season and dehydrate it at home," recommends Angie Tagtow, an environmental nutritionist based in Iowa and a leading advocate championing public access to fresh, affordable, sustainably raised food.

"Drying your own fruit in season eliminates the added sweeteners and preservatives often added to commercially dried fruit, so all you taste is the pure food flavor."

Dried fruits such as blueberries and cranberries also offer lots of antioxidants, and can be used as a snack, added to baked items or sprinkled on top of yogurt or oatmeal.

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MacGyver Your Pantry

Remember MacGyver, the lead character from the 1980s television show of the same name, who could make just about anything from whatever parts he had on hand? Apply the same principle to your pantry (minus MacGyver's ever-present duct tape) and think outside the box when a recipe calls for a specific ingredient that you don't have.

This substitution approach works particularly well for ingredients you wouldn't commonly have on hand, like fresh buttermilk.

Stuck in the middle of a recipe when you realize you don't have a can of sweetened condensed milk?

Here's an easy substitute for sweetened condensed milk that's much less processed than the commercial variety. This can be used in recipes that call for one can of sweetened condensed milk:

Ingredients: 1 cup dry milk powder 1/3 cup hot water 1/3 cup sugar 3 T. butter (melted)

Directions:

Combine all ingredients in a blender, layering wet and dry ingredients. Blend until smooth.

Try this recipe for Chocolate Cobbler -- it includes ingredients that allow you to substitute for self-rising flour.

Add a Dash of Exotic Flavor

For minimal space and cost, you can sprinkle some seasonings into your meals that bring a range of global flavors to your rural homestead.

These items probably aren't available at your local country market; add them to your shopping list for your next trip to the big city: Tamarind paste: Tart spice used in Latin American and Asian dishes such as Pad Thai. Sesame oil: Vegetable oil derived from sesame seeds and used in Indian and Asian cooking. Hoisin sauce: Chinese dipping sauce made with garlic, vinegar and chili peppers—an interesting alternative to soy sauce. Fish sauce: Southeast Asian condiment used to flavor various dishes.

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Keep Organized

The key to pantry management is restocking before you run out of something. This is especially important if it may be a few weeks before your buying club places another order.

I keep a sticky note inside my kitchen cabinet. When I notice I'm running low on something, it turns into my handy shopping list.

Organization also applies to how you keep your items stored on the shelves. Grouping like items together aids in quickly finding things, such as canned goods, baking supplies, spices and rice.

Think of your farmhouse pantry as the garden's dance partner, working together with your harvest bounty to bring flavorful, healthy meals to your family's table.

Our farmhouse pantries may contain different ingredients than a century ago—chocolate chips and soy sauce didn't cross Laura Ingalls Wilder's shopping list—but the spirit remains the same: They serve as the mission control of our kitchen, enabling us to celebrate farm life by making every meal special.

About the Author: Lisa Kivirist is the co-author of *ECOprenuring* and *Rural Renaissance*, and is a W.K. Kellogg Food and Society Policy Fellow. The recipes in this article are from her cookbook, *Edible Earth*, with specialties from her B&B on her Wisconsin farm, *Inn Serendipity*.

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