Poverty Prepping, Volume 2

Food Self-Sufficiency: Reality Check

By
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Introduction

Often in conversations the subject comes up about growing or producing our own food. Some people want to move to the country and get into small-time farming, and some just want to have a garden. Others want to have a few meat animals around, such as chickens or rabbits.

There are also those who want to work toward producing most or all of their own food. Some like the independence and some worry about future hardships, either from natural disasters or man-made events.

But if you're going to grow a garden or crops, what do you need to do that? How much land? What type of land? How will you preserve and store the food you grow?

Animals need shelter and food. Do you have a place to put your chickens, rabbits, goats, calves, or other animals? What will you feed them if times are hard? How will you feed them now, if your goal is self-sufficiency? Will your plan include buying feed, or growing it yourself?

In addition to gardening and raising animals, other sources for food self-sufficiency include foraging, hunting, and fishing. What supplies or equipment will you need to do these things? What laws will you have to follow, and do they allow you enough plants or animals to meet your needs?

This books is about the numbers. It's not a how-to book, it's about what you need for the “how to”. We'll look at how to figure out how much space you need for gardens or animals, how many jars you'll need if you plan to get into canning, and what other options there are for storing food.

I'll talk about animals and their needs, and suggest ways to feed and shelter them that won't break your bank account. I'll try to point you the right direction to find out what you need to know about foraging, hunting, and fishing, plus share some tips from my own experiences.

This book is geared toward those with limited funds, but will also be helpful to more prosperous readers who are considering growing or otherwise providing for most or all of their own food. The 'how-to' may vary but the numbers are the same, whether you're rich or poor.

Some people are 'preppers' and have been buying and storing food in case of hard times. It's a great plan, but knowing how to produce your own food is real security. Hand in hand with that is knowing what you'll need to produce, preserve, and store that food. That is what this book is about.

Chapter 1 Gardening

One of the most common phrases I've heard over the years is “If things get bad I'll plant a garden.” It's a lovely thought, kneeling among the plants in the garden, feeling the rich, warm soil, plucking a weed here and there, savoring a ripe tomato right off the plant.

But if you’re planning to plant a garden when things get bad, we have to assume you don’t already have a garden and you’ll be working up a new plot. How much land will you need? There's no cut and dry formula. If you see an article, book, or website giving you an absolute number of square feet times how many people you hope to feed, disregard it.

Too many things have to be taken into account, and it varies considerably. Things to consider are climate: how long is your growing season? In a warm area with a long growing season you can plant a second crop after you harvest the first one.

In a cold area you may be limited in the types of food you can grow because some things simply won't ripen in such a short time, and you'll only have time for one crop.

You can extend the growing season by covering your plants in cold weather, such as on nights when frost is likely. In the spring you can put cans or buckets upside-down over the plants at night to keep them warm. At the end of the summer you can throw old blankets, sheets, tarps, newspaper, or whatever you have over the plants to protect them from the cold nights.

In hot areas you can cover the plants with newspaper or sheets during the afternoon to keep them from baking in the sun. In windy areas you can stack brush, branches, rocks, or anything that will create a windbreak to protect your plants.

How wet or dry is the weather in your proposed area? What about the soil itself? Is it sand, or clay, or is it black and loamy? In most places you’ll have to build up the soil with compost or other nutrients.

You can add leaves, grass, aged manure, straw, shredded newspaper, or sand to your soil. Sand won't add nutrients but it'll help break up hard soil so it will drain better. There are excellent books on composting and building up soil. But if it's an emergency and you must plant, then do so in whatever soil you have. It's better than

doing nothing, and you never know, the soil might be good enough as it is to grow at least a mediocre garden.

You'll probably be doing gardening with hand tools if it's a hard-times garden. If that's the case you'll want to have a good shovel for breaking up the soil. If your ground is hard and rocky you might want to have a pick for breaking it up and digging out rocks. A hoe and garden rake are nice but you can get by without them if you have to.

If you have a rototiller and the fuel to power it, you can use it to break up the dirt and 'plow' it for planting. If you're getting into gardening as a lifestyle and main food source, investing in a rototiller is a good idea.

Building raised beds eliminates the need for a rototiller. The soil doesn't have heavy equipment driving on it, and is never walked on, so it doesn't pack down hard like regular garden soil. It's pretty easy to work it with a shovel or hoe.

Next, you'll need seeds. Most seeds keep for one to five years, so tucking away seed packets for an indeterminate length of time "just in case" could result in reduced or no germination when the seeds are planted.

In plain English, you could have a lot of 'dead' seeds that won't sprout and grow. When I plant old seed I over-plant and then transplant extras into the gaps where plants didn't come up. I've successfully transplanted carrots, turnips, broccoli, and peas this way.

If you can get them, use open-pollinated or heirloom seeds so that you can save seed from the crop each year to replant the next year. A lot of gardeners swap seeds, so you might be able to get in on that. If you don't have seed to trade at first, see what else you have on hand that you might be able to trade for some seeds.

Hybrid seed isn't always sterile but sometimes the vegetables grown from saved hybrid seed aren't true to the plants you harvested them from. Whatever you end up with is probably edible, but each generation, or future crop, will continue to decline. This may be in vegetable size, amount produced per plant, or other variables.

Go ahead and plant the garden if all you have is hybrid seed. It's better than nothing, and it will buy you time for locating true non-hybrid seed for the next garden.

How much seed do you need? Enough to plant the whole space you dug up, right? Well, sort of. It depends what you're planting. Seeds for carrots and broccoli are very small, while seeds for peas and green beans are much bigger. Broccoli plants can take up as much room as peas or green beans though.

A single carrot seed will grow a plant that only needs about 2 square inches. A single squash seed can grow a plant that takes 30 square feet. A single carrot seed produces one carrot, whereas a single squash seed can produce 10 to 20 fruits.

A small wedge of potato with a single eye on it can grow upwards of 10 lbs. of potatoes and needs about 2 to 3 square feet.

Look at the type of vegetables you want to grow, see how much space they require, then do some math and figure out how much you'll need for each section of your garden. Most seed packets have information on the back which tells you how many feet of row it will plant.

If you're using home-saved seed you'll have to do some guesswork, but before long it'll become second nature. You'll be able to sketch a map of your garden and know how much space it will take for each of what you want to plant. You can tailor it to what you and your family like to eat, and to your climate and garden conditions.

Always save more seed than you think you'll need. The future is unpredictable. You might need to expand your garden, or be able to use seeds for barter, or have a germination disaster causing you to replant part of your garden.

You might have a crop failure. We've saved carrot seed and replanted for six years, and this year not one carrot came up. I don't know why. I'm grateful that we had more carrot seed saved so that we could replant.

Unfortunately we didn't have enough extra saved to replant the whole area. However, it's enough that we can save most of this year's crop to use for future seed. We had a good enough harvest of carrots the two previous years that we still have plenty of dried and canned carrots to see us through.

Other things that can destroy seeds are torrential rains that will drown a planting, or an unexpected hot, dry spell that kills the sprouting seeds or the young seedlings. If you have extra seed on hand you can replant the parts that were damaged and try again.

The amount of space needed for a garden would also vary depending on what else you have to eat, such as hunted or raised animals, fishing, and foraging.

Other things that affect how much you can grow in a given space are mulching and density of planting.

If you have access to straw, lawn clippings, newspaper, cardboard, or even lots of plastic sheeting, you can pack it over the dirt between your rows, snugging it up close to the plants. This keeps moisture in the soil and also protects the roots and lower parts of the plant from excessive cold or heat.

Density of planting refers to how close together your plants are in a row, and how close your rows are to each other. I've played around with intensive gardening, which is similar to square-foot gardening, and I've produced more in the same area as I have with traditional spacing.

By putting 2 or 3 rows closer together, then a wider row to allow for access, followed by 2 or 3 rows close together again, I was able to plant twice as much in the same area. It also helps keep down the weeds.

My husband prefers the traditional 3' wide space between rows so he can run the rototiller between the rows. It keeps the weeds down between the rows, but once we pack the plants with mulch he can't get the rototiller through between the rows for the rest of the summer.

We'll assume that while you are waiting for the harvest you've had other things available to eat, because it takes a couple months from planting time before you get the first edibles from your garden, and most take longer.

If you have time, money, and opportunity to do so, plant as many edible perennials as you can. Perennials are plants that come back every year on their own, such as rhubarb, asparagus, or fruit trees and bushes.

Find out which fruits grow well in your area. If you're in the south you can grow things like peaches. In the north you can grow apples and cherries. Some things like plums will grow in just about any climate. Plant as many as you can, and as many varieties as you can.

You can probably also grow strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, or blueberries. There are other berries like currants, gooseberries, and elderberries, and you can find more by searching online or asking other gardeners.

Nut trees are great to grow or have available. The nuts provide protein, fat, and calories, which are a necessary part of the diet and hard to get from a garden or foraging. If you're a vegetarian, nut trees along with beans grown in your garden will be an important part of your self-sufficient diet.

Don't forget the perennial vegetables: rhubarb (which is sort of a fruit), asparagus, and bunching onions (called "Walking onions" in some areas). They take little care and come back every year.

A lot of herbs are perennial, depending where you live. Here in the north Oregano, Thyme, and Sage come back every year. Down south Rosemary is a perennial, as are other herbs, but they die with the first frost up here. You can grow them as an annual (one-year crop) and save seed to grow them again the next year.

So...how much land? As much as you can reasonably manage. It's better to start off with a smaller plot and work your way up, than to go huge and not be able to keep up with it. How much time do you have? Are you working a job at the same time? Don't exhaust yourself in the first year or two, and burn out.

There's a difference between having a desire to be self-sufficient and produce your own food, or having to do so because you'll starve otherwise. Starvation is a strong motivator.

Now, we're ready to talk about the harvest.

Chapter 2 Jars

How many days are there in a year? You, in the back row, blue shirt. “Bing”, you’re right, 365 days. Okay, next question. How are you going to preserve your garden bounty?

Most people will blithely say “by canning it”. Now put that together with 365 days in a year. This is very important, so pay close attention here.

In order to eat at least one jar of something every day, that’s 365 jars and lids, not to mention enough of ‘whatever’ to put in the jars to be canned. Three...Hundred...And Sixty-Five jars. For one jar a day.

That’s a scary thought, and even more scary if you have, for example, a family of 4. One jar of food probably isn’t going to be enough.

That means two a day, or 730 jars a year. Three a day…1,095 jars, plus an equal number of canning lids. It’s recommended that you not reuse the lids for canning, so you’ll need that many *each* year. Lids can be reused for non-canning purposes such as storing dehydrated foods.

So for you and your family, if you have others besides yourself, to eat one jar, total, three times a day, is 1,095 jars. How many do you have?

I've had people smile proudly and say “I picked up three boxes of them on clearance this Fall!” That's a good start but it's still only three dozen jars. 36 jars. New jars usually come with lids and rings, so the first batch is ready for canning.

Don't be overwhelmed. Buy whatever you can add to your jar collection each year. Watch for sales during canning season, clearances and mark-downs after canning season, and keep an eye out for them at yard sales and thrift stores.

When we got serious about food self-sufficiency about ten years ago, canning wasn't popular. The economy was good and fewer people were growing a garden and canning. Most people I knew with gardens were freezing everything. This is great if you have the freezer space, live with 'grid' electricity (which is pretty much unlimited), and expect to continue to be able to run your freezer.

We live with off-grid solar power, which is limited, so canning and dehydrating food is a big part of our life. I put up notices at the grocery stores and community bulletin boards: “Family needs jars for canning”. A lot of older people gave me all

their jars and canning stuff because the younger people in their family weren't interested. I got literally hundreds of jars, rings, and boxes of new lids, for free.

With the upsurge in gardening and canning it might be harder to get jars this way, but it's worth a try. You never know what people have stashed away in their attics or garages. There are probably a lot of people who would feel good about passing them on to someone interested in it.

I started ordering lids by the case through our local food co-op. They're slightly cheaper that way, and with the large amount we use each year it adds up to decent savings. Most grocery stores and department/box stores have them, in boxes of twelve lids.

For dehydrating you can reuse lids you took off jars of home-canned food. It's not important to have a vacuum-seal, though vacuum-sealing jars of dehydrated food is becoming more popular. I use non-canning jars such as salsa jars for dehydrated food, as well as any canning jars that have chips on the rim and aren't safe for canning any more.

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Back to how many canning jars you'll need... if it's more manageable to think in terms of dozens of jars, that's 34.2 dozen at the rate of eating one jar of food a day for a year.

91.2 dozen jars for 3 jars a day! Well, okay, that still sounds like a lot of jars, and it is. Imagine 91 cases of twelve jars sitting in a stack.

They take up a lot of space. I know. I have at least that many. Where to store them? You can get creative and keep boxes of them under beds, stacked in closets, stack and cover with a table cloth and use for an end table or bedside stand, line them along a wall under a window, cover with a cloth, and grow potted herbs on top of them.

If you live where the temperature goes below freezing you'll have to make sure you store the jars where the liquid inside won't freeze and break the jar. Meats canned without water, and canned cheese and butter, won't break the jar.

When I need boxes to put the jars in, I go to the grocery store. Quart jars fit nicely in the cases mayonnaise comes in, and pint jars fit in cases that some sizes of jelly or pickles come in. They also fit in the cases the large cans of baked beans or Progresso soups come in. A lot of grocery stores are recycling cardboard now, but if you ask they might save a few for you.

Those in the south can get by with fewer jars by eating from their garden for several months, which reduces the amount of food needing to be canned or otherwise processed and stored.

In all climates you can try to use up the canned food before the next harvest. The need for jars can be reduced by using other food preservation methods such as

dehydrating, brining, pickling, and using a root cellar.

Most fruits and vegetables are easily dehydrated by slicing them into 1/4” or smaller pieces. Spread them on a screen and put them in a dry place, preferably out of direct sunlight and where bugs and birds can't help themselves to your goodies.

I have several mesh trays that came in a package as “extra trays” for an electric dehydrator that I've never owned. They were at a thrift store. I use them just sitting about the kitchen to dehydrate food. We live in a climate that is hot and dry in the summer, and we don't have air conditioning. It's a good place for food and herb drying.

If your climate is too humid that might not work well. The food might become moldy before it dries.

If you have a gas oven with a pilot light you can set the trays in there and it'll be warm enough to dry the food. I put a dish towel in the oven door to allow a small space for moisture to exit the oven, but I don't know if that is necessary.

The plastic canvas screen-type stuff sold in craft stores makes good drying racks. You have to set them on something, like cookie sheets or cooling racks, for support. They come in different sizes. I bought the large ones that are about 18” by 24” and I lay them on old bread racks that a bakery was throwing away.

If you have access to extra oven or refrigerator racks you can set the plastic screening on those. That would give support and allow a lot of air circulation. Sometimes you can get these from thrift stores, and here where we live, the county dump has a drop-off place for appliances. I asked nicely and they let me salvage racks and from stoves and refrigerators.

Something else I've done when I had a lot to dehydrate was to set up our tent and put the racks in there. I left all the windows and door flaps open, and the screens protected the food from birds and bugs. The sunshine and wind worked to dry the food, which one year was a bumper crop of peas.

Once the food is dry, pack it into plastic bags, or plastic or glass bottles. Glass is the most desirable for long-term storage, but if you're trying to be self-sufficient you'll probably be eating and rotating the food fast enough that plastic is okay.

There is some concern about whether plastics are porous and allow air in over time, and other concerns about the plastics themselves and whether they change the taste and odor of food, and the possibility of harmful chemicals in the plastic.

Store the dehydrated food in a cool, dark place, if possible. Dark protects flavor and color, and a steady, cool temperature gives it a longer shelf life. Fluctuating temperatures are hard on any stored food. That usually happens when food is stored in an attic, garage, or shed. Days are warm, nights are cold, and the food is constantly warming or cooling. Try to avoid that.

We've begun dehydrating nearly all of our fruits and vegetables to save jars for meat and dairy products. We do our canned meat as chunks, burgers, and ground. We also can cheddar, mozzarella, and cream cheese, butter, and egg nog.

The egg nog was a joke the first year. Since it's a seasonal item we canned some and put it away as a surprise for “Christmas in July”. Now it's a family tradition. Chill the jar of egg nog before opening it. We forgot one year and it's not as good at July room temperature.

Root cellars are very handy to have. We hand-dug a pit about 6' by 8', and about 6' deep, laid logs over it, covered it with plastic, and shoveled the dirt back over it in a mound. We dug a tunnel into it from the side, sort of like the tornado shelters that used to be on farms in the middle parts of the country. We framed in the doorway and used an old exterior door that was laying around.

It makes a serviceable root cellar. It has dirt walls and floor, and no vents (vents are preferable). We keep carrots, potatoes, turnips, and rutabagas in it clear into the next summer, and they're as good as the day we dug them from the garden. It didn't cost us anything but a lot of sweat.

If hard times or a disaster come along and you have to provide and store your own food, you might be able to do something similar. Basements can be used in much the same way. In warmer climates you can dig a pit in the middle of your garden and pile up things like potatoes or carrots, and just cover them with dirt or straw.

If you can find a copy of Mike and Nancy Bubel's book, “Root Cellaring”, it's the best book on the subject, and most of their ideas don't cost anything to build. If you have the money and the time, put in a decent root cellar. You'll be glad you did.

With all the work we do of slicing, chopping, peeling, and shelling of food to get it ready for canning or dehydrating, it's wonderful to dig up wheel barrow loads of potatoes and just wheel them to the root cellar and dump them in the bins my husband made out of scrap wood.

Same with carrots, turnips, and rutabagas. Chop off the tops and haul them to the root cellar! Done!

I don't have experience with brining, sugaring, or pickling, but if they're something you're interested in learning to do, there are books at most libraries, and free information on the internet. Look for youtube videos on any subject you're interested in, or join a gardening forum so you can ask and learn.

Chapter 3 Chickens

The next thing people say after the bit about planting a garden is something along the line of "…and get a few chickens for eggs and maybe some for meat". Brace yourself, here come the numbers!

A family of four, 2 eggs apiece, 4 times a week. Simple math…32 eggs. To allow for the hens to miss a day here and there, you'll need at least 5 hens. 7 days a week times 5 hens = 35 eggs, then subtract for the occasional missed day. This doesn't allow for extra eggs for baking or cooking, so you would probably want a few more hens.

In the winter, egg production will slow or stop. If you're in the south, you have a longer "laying" season, possibly even year-round. As you go north, the 'laying' season shortens. Keeping the chicken coop warm won't increase egg production. It has to do with hours of daylight.

Some people put lights on a timer in the chicken coop to keep the hens laying through the winter. I've heard that they lay less than in the summer, but that you will get some eggs this way. We let our hens rest in the winter. During the summer when we have extra eggs we dehydrate them for winter use.

To dehydrate eggs we whip them as though we're going to make omelets or scrambled eggs. Then we spread them on wax paper-lined dehydrator racks (a fruit leather tray works too). This is one thing we do use the electric dehydrator for, to make sure they dry thoroughly and in a timely manner so the eggs don't spoil.

When dried the eggs look like peanut brittle without the peanuts. I dump it all in a cake pan and crumble it up, and put it in jars. You can pulverize it to powder with a blender, either at the time you pack it in jars, or when you use it. If you don't have a blender you can still crush them into powder with a spoon, it just takes a bit of time.

The mix is equal parts water and dry egg. Allow it to sit about half an hour to rehydrate. Even if it looks grainy it will cook up nice and the graininess will disappear as it cooks.

Back to chickens. The hens need to be replaced every 3 to 7 years, depending on your breed of chicken, climate, and feed, and whether you forced them to lay year round or seasonally. If you're truly self-sustaining, you need a rooster in order to replenish your flock, plus you need a hen or two who are willing to "sit" and hatch the eggs.

Sometimes you can borrow a rooster for a week or two while you save up eggs to be hatched. Offer the owner of the rooster a few of the chicks, or work out some other deal. They may not want anything for it, but at least offer.

If you're off-grid you may not have enough electricity from your solar electric set-up or other power source to operate an electric incubator. If you're in this situation and you really want to try to hatch out your own chicks, and you have a gas oven with a pilot light, you can wrap the eggs in a towel and put them in the oven on the lowest rack. Don't set them right on the bottom of the oven. It will cook the eggs and could set the towel on fire.

Put a couple bowls of water in the oven for humidity, and gently turn the eggs several times a day, then cover them again. I've seen this work, but the success rate is low, less than half the eggs hatching. If you have eggs to spare, it's worth a try if you need more chickens and don't want to, or can't, buy them.

But let's assume you've got a broody hen and she's setting on some eggs, and lucky you, 26 of them hatch! After the normal loss of a few of the little fluff balls, you have 23 left. They happily scratch around in the yard in the important manner of their full-grown counterparts, and you select the ones to keep as layers. Let's assume you decide to keep five of little hens.

Butchering day comes for the rest, but…wait a minute, that's only 18 meat birds! And they're not big and fat like fryers! They've been free-ranging on bugs and seeds in your yard all summer, and they're full-grown, but under those feathers, there's just not a lot of meat! Well, you decide, you'll just have more soups and stir-frys instead of fried chicken!

You have 18 chickens butchered for meat…that's a meal with meat about every 3 weeks. In order to eat chicken once a week you'll need 52 chickens. That's a lot of critters looking for free-range bugs and seeds. What do you eat with your fruits and veggies the other 6 days of the week?

Some people can add to that by raising other livestock, hunting, or fishing. Then you're back to the question of how to preserve it. The logical way if you're self-sufficient is to can it, and then we're back to the logistics of having and storing large amounts of jars and lids. Drying or "jerking" the meat can reduce how many jars you'll need, but is more limited in it's uses when it comes time for meal-planning.

Chickens are good garbage disposals. They'll eat just about any kitchen scraps and waste. Theoretically they'll eat garden waste too, but don't bet on it! In the summer mine turn up their noses at carrot tops, pea pods, and potato peels.

But if I dry these things and all the other garden waste... tops, peels, pods, etc. as I chop, peel, or de-top them for canning or dehydrating... they'll eat these things in the winter when the pickings are slimmer. I usually have a couple dozen buckets full of dried garden waste by winter, and I've used them for chickens, rabbits, and goats.

You can plant extra corn for your chickens. It can be dried on the cobs and tossed into the chicken pen as you need it, or you can scrape it off the cobs after it dries and bag it up. Other grains can be fed to chickens and you can grow them too. They're discussed in Chapter 5. First we'll talk about other meat animals you can raise.

Chapter 4 Other Domestic Meat Animals

In my ever-so-humble opinion, rabbits are overall the best meat animal for the self-sufficient person or family. They don't take a lot of room and they're not picky about the type of cage or hutch that they're in. They'll drink water from a bowl or from a drip tube, and they'll eat from any container or food just tossed in to them.

They're the easiest animal to grow food for in any climate. Besides the obvious carrots and salad greens, they'll eat any vegetable. They'll also eat the plants they're grown on. When you're done picking peas, broccoli, corn, or anything else in the garden, you can pull the plants and toss them in to the rabbits.

You can also feed rabbits all your garden scraps: pea shells, carrot tops, corn husks, the ends cut off green beans. Anything from the garden can go to the rabbits.

When you mow your yard you can rake up the cuttings for the rabbits, or if you use a catcher bag, you can toss some or all of it (depending how many rabbits and how big their cages are) into the rabbits. Make sure the grass hasn't been sprayed with herbicides or insecticides.

The rabbits will eat what they want and the rest will mix with their manure and make excellent garden additive. Rabbit manure is one of the best manures you can compost to improve your soil.

If you have room, even a small strip at the back of your garden, you can grow alfalfa. When it's tall, about 2' or so, you cut it. You can feed some of it to them fresh, or dry it. Tie it in bundles after it dries and store it where it won't get wet. Feed it to the rabbits a bit at a time, along with vegetables and yard/garden waste.

Rabbits love willow branches and they'll eat tender pine branches. In the winter when the rabbits are bored they'll get all excited when you toss in a branch or two. Twigs, actually.

If you don't have willows around your yard, look in marshy areas or along creeks or rivers. Some of the shrubs might be of the willow family and won't look exactly like the ones people grow in their yards. Pines are everywhere, so you should be able to find some.

I've heard they'll eat Aspen, poplar, and cottonwood branches but I've never tried it. They love the branches of fruit trees, so if you're pruning yours, give them to the rabbits. I think I'd try just about any type of slender branch if I couldn't find the ones I've already listed. It's not a real need in their diet but it helps keep them from getting bored and trying to chew their way out of their cages, and it cleans their teeth.

If you're already growing grains for chickens or other animals you can mix those in with the rabbits' vegetables. Some rabbits are picky about grains, others like them. Grinding the grains helps. Dry beans are something else you can grind and feed to the rabbits, but none of these things should be their sole food. The more variety you can give them, the better.

This might not be in accordance with whatever scientific formula is used to make commercial rabbit food but it'll keep your rabbits alive and healthy. It might take the rabbits a bit longer to reach butcher size but it's food you can produce without needing outside means. If you have income you might prefer to buy commercial feed and not have to grow or forage to feed your rabbits.

How many rabbits? It depends on how many people you plan to feed, how often you will need rabbit meat for meals, and how you plan to cook the meat. If fried rabbit is the main entree of your meal it won't go as far as it would if you were making rabbit and dumplings or stir fry.

Since this isn't a “how-to” book I won't go into the details of raising rabbits. But you'll need separate cages for each rabbit since they'll fight if you keep them together.

There are other animals you can raise for meat, such as goats, sheep, cows, ducks and other birds. The bottom line is whether you can feed them, provide them shelter, and do you have someone willing to kill the animals at butchering time.

Don't forget dairy animals. I've had goats before and been around dairy cows. They're a serious commitment since you have to be around twice a day for milking time, or arrange for someone to do the milking. There are a lot of things you can make with milk from either dairy animal, but you'll have to consider the usual concerns: Food and housing, plus milking.

If you have the land for it, a dairy cow isn't a bad investment. If you have less land, you might want to look into the idea of getting goats. Try some fresh goat milk before you get a goat. Don't buy the stuff at the grocery store, unless they have it fresh in cartons. The canned stuff isn't the same at all.

The best thing would be to find someone who is selling goats and tell them you're interested and ask for a small sample of the milk. Please only do this if you're seriously considering getting a goat.

I have to keep refraining from turning this into a “how to”. Right now I'm twitching and trying not to add in things like “If you get a goat you can tether it out to browse on brushy areas you want cleaned up”, or a caution that animals like goats sometimes need special care like hoof trimming, so keep vet bills in mind. You can learn to do some of these things yourself.

When we had goats we used to bring the warm milk in the house, pour it through a coffee filter to remove any 'stuff', then add chocolate powder to it and drink it!

In the poor countries of the world you are more likely to see goats and chickens than other animals. They're easier to feed than critters such as cows, and they take less room.

Chapter 5 Grains

Our chickens free-range during the months things are growing here and the bugs are active. Unfortunately this far north, that's from about the end of May until the middle of October. So we have to provide other food for them.

We've started growing some of our own grains in the last 3 years and I can tell you, it's a big job planting, harvesting, and threshing wheat, oats, rye, and barley with hand tools. We're nowhere close to growing enough to feed our chickens year round, let alone having enough to use for our own cooking.

We have to buy commercial feed at this time to make up for what we can't produce. Those home-grown eggs are still delicious but they're no longer organic since commercial animal feed is sprayed with whatever herbicides, pesticides, or fertilizer farmers use these days. Organic animal feed is available but pricier.

We use 300 lbs. of layer feed per year to feed 7 hens, plus table scraps and seasonal free-ranging. We're too far north to grow corn, but people who can grow it greatly ease the job of growing their own animal feed. Corn is much easier to harvest and process by hand than wheat and other grains.

Soybeans are a great thing to grow for animal feed. You can set aside part of your garden for them, or make a patch just for soybeans. The protein is good for animals, and adding it to your chickens' food of grains and vegetables (scraps), along with dried, crushed egg shells (for calcium), makes a good "Layer" diet. Home-grown eggs are far more delicious than their grocery store counterparts.

Wheat, oats, rye, and barley grow well in our climate with almost no care. At harvest time we cut the heads off the stalks and store them in paper or cloth sacks until we can thresh them.

To thresh them we throw the heads on a tarp and walk on them or smack them with the broom. We gather up what's left of the heads and put them back in sacks. The grains are gathered from the tarp and tossed into the air over the tarp so the 'chaff' can blow away. The chaff are very lightweight bits of grain shells and other debris from the wheat plant.

We bag the savable grain to be ground and used later. The heads that we saved are tossed into the chicken pen in the winter, an armload at a time. The chickens will happily and busily thresh out whatever grain we missed. Not only does it feed them but it gives them exercise.

If you're like most people, you like the things grains can make. Ideally you would want to be able to grow grains for the humans in your household too.

Meat, vegetables, and fruit are a wonderful diet, but when you're doing the kind of work it takes to keep a self-sufficient homestead going, you really appreciate the breads, biscuits, cookies, pies, and other things grains can make.

In our home with two of us we use around 25 lbs. of wheat a month, since we make everything from scratch. We'd need to get our homegrown production up to 300 lbs. just for cooking, plus the 300 lbs for the chickens, per year.

Growing and harvesting 600 lbs. of wheat and other grains with hand tools is a daunting prospect. Just imagine if we added rabbits, goats, and other animals to the demand for feed!

Chapter 6 Foraging

In nearly all parts of the country there are lots of edible wild foods and herbs. From dandelions to wild onions, there's a whole range of things you can gather to supplement what you grow or raise.

The first thing to do is to get a really good guide to foraging. One that is focused on the part of the country where you live is the most useful. It doesn't do me much good to read about palms, cactus, and seaweed/kelp when I live in Montana! Likewise, knowing that kinnikinnik is edible doesn't help someone in the south, since it's a northern plant!

The next thing to do, if you are lucky enough, is to find someone in your area who knows plants. Make sure that they are qualified to teach you, and pick their brains. Check with the local community college or county extension office and see if anyone is teaching foraging or plant identification.

Big cities are actually more likely to have such a thing. In the Los Angeles area Christopher Nyerges teaches plant identification and takes people on “nature walks” in the city, suburbs, and surrounding wilderness to show them the plants. Check to see if such a thing is available where you live.

If you're going to pick berries, mushrooms, or anything else on federal land such as National Forest, make sure you can do so without a permit. Usually if you're gathering for your own use and not commercially there isn't a requirement for a permit.

Some plants are so familiar to us we'd know them anywhere, and they grow nearly everywhere. I'm sure you've seen dandelions, clover, roses, and cattails. You might not have known they are edible, but they are.

You've probably also seen plantain and pineapple weed, which are both edible, but you might not know that's what they're called. They grow in most populated areas, mainly hard-packed places like along roads and sidewalks.

Use caution when gathering plants near roads. There could be issues with chemicals from vehicle exhaust or other pollutants.

A lot of wild food is basically “salad” food. They're greens, herbs, and flowers. They've packed full of vitamins and anti-oxidants but not very high in calories, protein, carbohydrates, or fat, which are essential to maintaining health and energy. There are plants that have starch or even fat, and it's good to gather these in addition to salad foods.

Roots and tubers have starch (carbohydrates) and a higher calorie content than greens. Cattails and Salsify are two that fit in this category.

Some parts of the country have wild nut trees. The nuts are a good source of protein and fat. Some nuts are thought to be inedible, such as acorns, but there are processes you can do that will render them edible. If you have these nuts in your area, learn the process in case you ever need to harvest and eat them.

The flower heads of white clover can be gathered, dried, and ground into flour. You can mix it with wheat flour (or other grains) and extend your flour, plus get more variety of nutrients. Edible roots can be dried and ground or pounded into flour too.

You might have wild grains in your area. In southern California wild buckwheat grows along roads and hillsides. Seeds/grains of grass plants are edible but it's tedious harvesting them. If starvation ever becomes an issue it might be worth walking along snipping the seed heads off into a bag. Thresh and grind them into flour.

Grain or seeds can be ground between two rocks. Find a flat, smooth rock and lay the food to be ground on it. Use a smaller rock, also mostly smooth and about the size you can comfortably hold in your hand, and rub it over the grains or seeds. You can use circular motions or push forward and backward, or whatever is comfortable.

It's tedious but it works. You probably just want to do a meal's worth at a time. But if you're living the self-sufficient lifestyle, providing food is your 'job' and you'll have time for some of the things you don't right now.

Berries are a well-known food source. Make a point to learn what berries grow in your area and where to find them. Even if you don't need them now, you'll be ahead of the game if you need them later.

In our area we have huckleberries (sort of a wild blueberry), raspberries, service berries, thimble berries, elderberries, strawberries, kinnikinniks (A bland cranberry-like berry), and Oregon grapes growing wild all over the place. The times when they come ripe are during a slow time in the garden.

The rains of early summer are over. The plants in the garden are well-established and the weeds have slowed down. We mulch the garden good, water it deeply once a week, and start spending whole days in the woods picking berries and other edibles.

Mushrooms are another food you can forage for, but this is an area to use extreme caution. The safe mushrooms are delicious and nutritious, but you want to make sure beyond *all doubt!!!* that you are harvesting safe mushrooms.

This applies to all foods. Some safe foods have poisonous look-alikes. Wild carrots and Queen Anne's Lace look alike. One is safe, one is deadly. BE SURE you

are picking the correct plant. I'm not sure on the wild carrots so we don't harvest them.

Identify the weeds that you pull from your garden. After we found out that most of what we were pulling were either edible salad greens or useful herbs, we stopped being so thorough with our weeding. We'd let some of the Lamb's Quarters and other 'weeds' grow a bit, then pull them for a salad with dinner.

You can make delicious teas from several of these plants as well: mint, pineapple weed (similar to chamomile and a member of that plant family), clover, raspberry leaves, strawberry leaves, blackberry leaves, and others.

Rose hips, the small fruit that forms after a rose blooms, makes a great tea high in Vitamin C. Pine Needle tea is also high in Vitamin C.

To make tea, steep the part of the plant you are using in boiling or almost-boiling water. Filter or otherwise remove the plant parts, then drink. A good herb book will tell you more specifically how to do this, such as ratio of plant to water.

There are more wild foods than I could put in this chapter, but it's more to give you an idea that foraging is a viable addition to your food self-sufficiency plan. It's also a pleasant way to spend a day while providing food for the table!

Chapter 7 Hunting

Some people might find the idea of hunting to be offensive. If so, I hope those who do are vegetarians. Meat-eaters who oppose hunting are kind of a contradiction in my opinion!

I like knowing that my 'meat' spent it's life wild and free in it's own habitat. It's my hope that it doesn't even know I'm there when I pull the trigger. I believe that it's healthy and natural to eat meat along with fruits, vegetables, and grains, and I still get along with my vegetarian friends!

Some animals only eat plants, others eat other animals. It's part of the food chain, and as humans, we're at the top of it. The meat on my plate might come from my own chicken pen or up on the mountain somewhere. It might have died by my ax, or by a bullet from my rifle.

If hunting is going to be part of your food self-sufficiency the first thing you need to do is to become thoroughly familiar with your state's game laws. Getting this information is as simple as going online to the website of whatever agency oversees hunting in your state, or to a sporting goods store or the sporting goods department of places like Wal-mart, and picking up the free booklet for that year's hunts and the related laws and regulations.

Selecting the rifle or bow for your hunt of choice is going to be a personal matter. If you have no knowledge or experience in this area be sure to find qualified people to give you guidance. In most cases it's not wise to simply buy a firearm and head out in the woods to hunt. Go to a firing range and become familiar with it.

Same thing with a bow. Practice with a target in a safe area, preferably with an experienced person with you to give you tips and show you techniques.

Take a hunter's education or hunter safety class. They're usually offered by whatever department handles hunting and wildlife in your state. Some places offer classes just for women, and some just for kids.

The clothing you need doesn't have to be as complicated as the wonderful gear you see depicted in magazines and catalogs. Sometimes all you need to meet the requirement is a cheap blaze-orange vest.

You might like to buy camo clothing or other hunting clothes, and that's fine. But don't let not being able to afford those things stop you from hunting. I have some nice camo hunting clothes but sometimes I just throw the orange vest over blue jeans and a t-shirt and go hunting.

Dress appropriately for the weather and plan for changes in the weather. Speaking of which, *check* the weather before you head out. Carry emergency supplies, even if it's as little as a foil space blanket in one pocket, and matches or lighter in another pocket. You probably already plan to have a knife with you.

Take time to read a good wilderness survival book and a first-aid book. Let someone know where you're going and when you'll be back. Then be sure to let the person know when you get back. Don't just go home and put the teakettle on and leave them to wonder if you're still out there, lost in the dark.

Study the terrain where you plan to hunt. Get maps, or go to the library or forest service office and look at maps. Go to Google Earth and look over the area, especially if you're not familiar with it.

If you're new at hunting, see if you can find a mentor. A lot of hunters are happy to teach others the skill. Some aren't and want to protect not only their hunting ground but also their methods. But don't be afraid to ask.

Go to the library and read hunting magazines. You can buy and/or subscribe to them, but if you're trying to be careful with your money and you're not sure hunting is something for you, the library is a great free source.

When you buy your hunting license ask about extra tags. Sometimes you can get a second one good for another deer, usually specifically a doe or a buck. Different zones in our state have different numbers of how many deer tags an individual can get. In some zones we're only allowed one, but we might be able to drive 50 miles or so and get up to 4 more tags per person. It changes every year according to how many deer are in an area.

Don't forget that meat can be canned too, not just frozen. That frees up concerns about freezer space! Jerky is another favorite that you can learn how to make.

Butchering a deer isn't much different from butchering a chicken. It's just bigger and takes longer. If you've ever cut up a supermarket chicken you can probably cut up a deer or other game animal. You might have to take some time to get into the mindset, but it's doable.

Hunting isn't all about big game like deer and elk. It's also about rabbits, squirrels, and wild birds such as grouse, pheasants, partridges, and turkeys. A squirrel might have to become part of stew or a stir fry, and the same is true of other small game. With grouse we filet off the breasts and make excellent fried 'chicken' with them, then boil up the rest of the bones and meat, debone it, and make grouse and dumplings. Two meals for two people out of a small bird!

Check out the possibility of “nuisance” hunting. This is animals that are deemed a nuisance, such as wild hogs in some areas, and often can be hunted without a license or quotas. In Nevada coyotes and jackrabbits don't require a license, whether

you're a resident or not. I'd have to be pretty hungry to eat a coyote, but I'd give jackrabbit a try.

Where to hunt? Public land is the easiest. National Forest and BLM (Bureau of Land Management) are usually open to the public. In areas where there isn't much public land you might have to ask around and find a land owner who will let you hunt. I've heard it can be pretty tough in some areas, and some land owners will charge for the privilege.

You might have to do some research and ask a lot of questions in order to get set up with a place to hunt.

Learning to hunt, even if you don't pursue it actively at this time, can save your life if times get hard or a disaster or other terrible event happens to disrupt your regular sources of food.

Chapter 8 Fishing

If you've never fished before and you're not sure it's something you'll want to take up as either a hobby or a serious food source, just buy a cheap rod & reel combination at a store like Wal-mart or Kmart. Dig some worms, or turn over rocks and look for grubs, or buy a container of night crawlers at the local store.

Don't get pulled in by the urge to buy a bunch of cool-looking lures until you know which fish they'll really catch and whether the lakes or rivers in your area even have those fish in them.

That's the place to start: Find out what fish are in the lake or river you plan to fish. It might be different in the lake down the road, so find out for that lake too.

We have one lake near us that has lake trout in it and not much else. Half a mile down and across the road is another lake that has no lake trout in it. That lake has perch and bass. A few miles away is a lake with primarily pike and perch.

Usually you can find out online or in the state fishing regulations handbook (free in sporting good departments) which fish are in each body of water. This is very useful to know before you set out.

Exactly what the fish are biting that day can be annoyingly variable and elusive! I can pull in perch after perch one day with a “white wiggler” on my hook, and the next day they'll swim right by it, turn up their noses, and say “eh...no thanks”. Some days they'll gobble up a worm, other days they act like the worms are toxic waste.

If the fish aren't biting after a dozen or so casts I either move to another spot on the lake or river, or I start trying other things in my tackle box. I'm not an accomplished fisherman, but I'm persistent. If I stick with it I'll usually go home with lunch or dinner in my pail.

We have an interesting thing here called the Salmon run. I always thought that only happened by the coast but it happens here in NW Montana. They swim upstream to spawn, and when they first leave the reservoir and start upriver, we're allowed to toss snagging hooks in and yank the Salmon to shore.

It's important to do this as soon as possible when they begin their upriver swim. After a few days the fish begin to die as they swim, and they literally begin to decompose and fall apart while still alive.

These Salmon are at the end of their cycle. We're catching fish that will die in a day or so and be nothing but rotting waste in the water. They're among the healthiest

fish you can eat up to that point. The limit varies each year but it's usually high enough that we have plenty for canning.

When I was a child we used to sit there with a handheld tool called a scaler, and we'd scrape the scales off the fish. I think they were Bluegill. It was in northern Wisconsin, and we mostly caught Bluegill and Bass. It's been years since I've done that.

We seldom 'clean' a fish by traditional methods. Usually my husband starts at the tail and makes a cut. He slides the knife up along the bones and filets off the meat. Then he flips that over and slides the knife along between the meat and the skin.

The rest of the fish body is either buried in the compost bin, or fed to the cat or dog. There's no cutting off of heads or slicing open the belly to remove the guts. I don't know if this method works with fish other than the pike, perch, trout, and salmon that we catch here.

Just like with hunting, check to see if there are “nuisance” fish you can catch and keep. Flathead Lake, a huge lake in NW Montana, has a fishing tournament every year to clean out a fish that is threatening the other fish in the lake. These guys catch over a thousand of this fish, each, during the weeks of the tournament.

One of our sons fishes in the tournament and he keeps the ones under about 12” to 14”, some of which he gives to us. We usually get a box or two full of these fish, and we stuff them in jars and run them through the canner. The bigger fish aren't good for eating, but they can be cooked in a pressure canner, mixed with rice, and used for dog food.

If you hear of such a tournament in your area but you're not a fisherman/woman and aren't interested in becoming one, hang around the public boat landing and get to know the fishermen. Spread the word that you'll take extra fish off their hands. Our son would hand you a huge box full! Some of those guys will too.

We've come off the lake bone-weary with a pile of fish to take care of, and if someone was there and interested, we'd gladly share some of the catch. It's easy to start a conversation with a fisherman. Just casually ask “how're they biting?”

Chapter 9 Conclusion

Someone said to me the other day that 100 years ago people were able to keep chickens and other animals fed without having to buy feed from the store. Yes, they did, but can you tell me how? Do you have the tools, equipment, and land? Are you physically able and mentally committed to the kind of work you’d be doing?

Having a garden and a few chickens is a breeze when things are going well and the economy is stable, and if you're not trying to be self-sufficient. If your goal is self-sufficiency as a lifestyle or in a crisis, crunch some numbers of your own!

If you have questions or comments, please email me at: povertyprepping@yahoo.com.

You may also be interested in my blog, which goes hand-in-hand with my other book, "Poverty Prepping: Stocking Up For Tomorrow When You Can't Afford To Eat Today". I make no money off the blog. It's just a resource for readers who want to share ideas for food independence or preparedness and storing food.

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