

SUSTAINABLE LIVING GUIDE:

61. SAVE MONEY: KEEP EDIBLES FRESH WITH BULK FOOD STORAGE SECRETS¹

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If you're not into buying food in bulk, now's a good time to start. Tomorrow, October 23, has been designated National Bulk Foods Day by the Bulk Is Green Council, a trade group representing bulk-food manufacturers. Buying in bulk allows you to ditch excess packaging—even use your own, reusable containers—and buy food for less. According to the Bulk Is Green Council, bulk foods like rice, grains, nuts, and dried fruits can cost anywhere from 30 to 96 percent less than their packaged counterparts. Given the economy, those savings are starting to register with people; bulk sales were up by 15 percent last year, according to the council.

But buying in bulk doesn't mean buying so much food that it goes stale before you have a chance to eat it. After all, a study published last year estimated that the food wasted in this country amounts to 1,400 calories per person per day. Keeping your food fresh for as long as possible really doesn't take much, says Mark Devencenzi, national sales director at SunRidge Farms, a company that manufactures organic nuts, grains, spices, granola, and other pantry staples. "For bulk-food storage, your three enemies are light, heat, and oxygen," he says. Most bulk foods will last a good while if stored in airtight containers, such as glass jars, in the refrigerator, he says.

For a more specific breakdown of popular staples, here's an easy guide to bulk-food storage:

Grains. Because they never seem to go bad, you may assume that leaving rice, quinoa, and oatmeal on the shelf indefinitely is fine. But these actually can get stale and rancid, particularly brown rice, which has oils that cause it to go bad much faster than white or wild rice. Left on a shelf in a cool, dark pantry, white rice will last indefinitely, but brown rice will only last a month after being opened. Store it, along with your other whole grains like quinoa, in airtight containers in the refrigerator. Not only does this keep them fresher, but it also prevents bugs from getting into your containers. Oatmeal, on the other hand, will last up to 12 months in a pantry.

Flour. In the pantry, most flours will last six to 12 months. However, like brown rice, whole grain flours contain oils (from the bran and wheat germ) that cause them to go rancid much more quickly. Store whole wheat flour in your fridge or freezer, in either an airtight container or sealed inside a plastic bag in its original packaging, and it will last up to 12 months. Some types of whole grain flours—buckwheat, oat, or rice flours, for instance—will last only two to three months in the freezer, so it's best to buy just the amount you'll use, rather than large bulk quantities.

Dried beans. Dried beans are one of the best foods to buy in bulk because they're full of nutrients and are inexpensive sources of protein. Bring them home from the store, put them in airtight jars, and leave them in your pantry. They'll keep for up to a year this way. Freezing or refrigerating uncooked dried beans can cause them to absorb moisture and lose flavor, but, for convenience, you can presoak and freeze dried beans so you can use them in a pinch without

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having to soak them or boil them. To precook your dried beans, soak them overnight as you normally would, and then boil them for 45 minutes to an hour—just until they start to get soft. Strain and cool them, then pack the beans in freezer-safe containers, and they'll be ready to use the next time you need them.

Nuts. Another cheap, healthy source of protein, nuts can quickly turn rancid if stored improperly, thanks to their high levels of healthy fats. Pop them in the refrigerator, where they'll keep for up to six months, or in the freezer, where they'll last for a year—or more. Frozen nuts can feel limp once they've thawed, so you might want to save them for baking rather than eating them raw.

Dried fruit. Unopened packages of dried fruit should last up to six months, but since you're purchasing it in bulk, put dried fruit in glass jars in the refrigerator once you get it home, and it should last anywhere from eight months to a year. If the fruit gets too dried out before you get to use it, soak it in some warm water to plump it up again.

Granola. "Because it's baked, granola is not going to have the same extended shelf life that you'll see with beans and grains," says Devencenzi. Like most other bulk foods, granola is best stored in the refrigerator, where it can last up to nine months.