

SUSTAINABLE LIVING GUIDE:

39. EIGHT WAYS TO EAT GREEN BY SLASHING YOUR GROCERY BILL¹

Blythe Copland©

If you've been hesitant to start buying organic food because it just plain costs more than regular, we understand—but we also think it's worth spending a little bit more to keep your body and the environment healthy and strong. So with that in mind, we found eight places you can save on eating—from cutting your food budget by 40 percent to banking an extra \$1,200 a year by using your leftovers—giving you enough extra to buy organic without thinking twice.

- (1) **Cut Back on Take Out:** When you start cooking at home more, your first few grocery trips might be more expensive than you're expecting—after all, stocking up on spices and ingredients can add up. But once you have a pantry stocked with supplies, you'll be surprised at how easy and cheap it is to whip up meals for just a few dollars—and once you try making your fast-food favorites on your own, you'll get hooked on the health benefits and savings. Then you can put most of your takeout budget back into your grocery shopping budget.

Potential savings: Around 40 percent, based on an AARP report that the average family spends 42 percent of its food budget on meals prepared outside the home.

- (2) **Become a DIY Cook:** Putting in a little extra preparation effort in the kitchen can help you save even more: try making your own spaghetti sauce for the cost of two cans of tomatoes (about \$2) instead of buying a \$4 jar. Get out your food processor to make your own hummus with canned garbanzo beans, spices, and lemon juice or olive oil. Buy your veggies whole and chop them at home; buy packets of yeast to mix with flour and water for pizza dough; mix olive oil and vinegars for quick and cheap salad dressings. For more ideas, check out Marye's list of 45 foods you can DIY, from baking powder and vanilla extract to nutella and bacon—and then think about the processed food, preservatives, and other weird stuff you're cutting out of your diet by knowing exactly what goes into each dish.

Potential savings: Endless. This is another place where you might have to spend more at first, but the overall price of your meals will go down (and the quality will go up).

- (3) **Eat Less Meat:** This might be kind of a no-brainer, but meat costs more than vegetables or beans—and has a higher environmental impact—so creating meatless meals during the week can help your bottom line and your carbon footprint. An added bonus: you won't have to remember to take that chicken, beef, or pork out of the fridge before work, and then get stuck with take-out on the days you forget.

Potential savings: \$2-\$4 per pound for buying one pound of veggies vs. one pound of meat

- (4) **Support Your Neighborhood:** Choosing local, seasonal foods at your grocery store can help you save, since you aren't paying the transportation costs to get those bananas to

¹ Planet Green, August 28, 2010

Michigan in January. But take it one step further in the summer and join a CSA: for a one-time cost, you'll get fresh fruit and veggies from your local farmers in your kitchen every week. The quality will be better than what you'd get at the supermarket, the variety will inspire you to try new dishes—and the CSA products are already organic, so you're really just spending the money you've already allocated.

Potential savings: One study showed that CSA members saved as much as \$50 over the cost of similar items at the grocery store—and though it will vary based on how willing you are to try new veggies, the benefits of supporting your local economy can't be beat.

- (5) **Plan Your Shopping Trip:** If you find yourself running back to the grocery store several times between major shopping trips to pick up those few things you've forgotten, you could be also running up your grocery bill by as much as \$120 each month. Try making a list of the foods you buy most often and keeping a copy on the refrigerator for easy access when something runs out—so that those Wednesday morning cries of, “There's no milk for breakfast!” won't send you scrambling.

Bonus: plan your meals ahead, too, so you can choose dishes that use similar fresh ingredients and prevent half tub of sour cream or head of lettuce from spoiling.

Potential savings: Up to \$120 each month

- (6) **Waste Less Food:** A leftover serving of pasta, one small piece of chicken, a handful of salad, or the ends of the bread might not seem like enough to make a meal on their own—and they're likely not—but saving your leftovers is one of the simplest kinds of reuse, and an easy way to save money. Combine the chicken and pasta with a fresh, chopped tomato and some spices for a five-minute meal; throw the handful of greens into soup; add extra anything to a frittata. Start seeing your leftovers as lunches and ingredients in other meals, and use your freezer to keep fresh veggies and fruits from going rotten in the fridge if you can't eat them fast enough.

Potential savings: Up to \$1,200 each year

- (7) **Grow Your Own:** From a backyard garden to windowsill containers—and everything in between—it's easier than you think to find the space and time to grow your own vegetables. The best for beginners? Try garlic, basil, or zucchini. Best for small spaces? Tiny vegetables, like baby cauliflower or cherry tomatoes. If your plot gets extremely prolific, try your hand at canning and freezing to preserve the harvest for the winter and keep fresh, organic food at hand all year long.

Potential savings: Depending on where you live and what you grow, they'll vary—but, for example, you can get a pack of organic Abraham Lincoln tomato seeds for \$2.95; expect to grow 12-oz tomatoes for a fraction of the price per tomato you'd pay at the grocery store.

- (8) **Cut Back Elsewhere:** Cutting back on the rest of your weekly shopping—cleaning supplies, toiletries, paper products— is another way of cutting costs (and waste). Give up paper towels in favor of reusable towels, buy concentrated (non-toxic) cleaning products and dilute them, and hit the bulk bins for dry goods that you can keep in storage. You'll trim your bill and cut back on unnecessary packaging.

Potential savings: Huge: It's not unusual for a family to use more than one roll of [paper towels](#) every week; replace these and you could save more than \$200 each year. Concentrated cleaners can help you spend as little as 50 cents on each scrub-down, and the list goes on.