

Smart Prepping When You're Broke: 15 High-Impact Cheap Wins

Let's face it, 60% of American household don't have enough savings to cover a \$1,000 emergency, so most preppers have difficulty affording preps. (Lee, 2025) If you don't, that's wonderful, but you are in the minority. Most families have been hit hard by inflation and cutbacks to programs and have to be creative in their preparations. That's OK though, because prepping is all self-reliance, doing things yourself and adaptation in the face of adversity. I put together a Go Bag and Rucksack using only free and cheap stuff. Let's check out some of the great free and cheap ways we can prepare for emergencies!

Fre

e Stuff

Check Facebook Marketplace, social media groups, Craigslist, and anyplace else that serves as bulletin board for your community for free stuff!

1. Firewood

You will often have to cut and split it yourself. Sometimes you even have to fell the trees, but that saves you having to buy firewood or having to buy a lumber permit and then spend gas to drive out to the boondocks to cut firewood.

2. Dimensional Lumber

The affordable housing crisis has gone through the roof! If you can find construction leftovers, pallets, wood furniture or waste or lumber to reclaim, that will save you a ton of money.

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If you have a few basic tools, a set of clamps, and a bottle of wood glue, you can often salvage dimensional lumber that is often new.

Lumber is necessary for many prepping projects. Here are a few ideas:

- Raised Garden Beds
- Multi-Bin Composter

- **Frame for Barrels for a Rainwater Catchment System**
- **Shelving for Storage**
- **A Frame or Furniture with Hidden Storage Compartments**
- **Workbench**
- **Sawhorse**
- **Chicken Coops, Rabbit Hutches or Livestock Pens**
- **Storm Shutters or Precut Window Boards**
- **Stove Jack Window Insert**
- **Lathe and Cardboard Target Stands for Training**

If you can get the lumber for free and have a set of basic tools, you can build any of these projects for the cost of fasteners, glue and sandpaper.

3. Foraging, Scavenging and Metal Detecting

I learned to check recently abandoned campsites, especially camps where heavy drinking has occurred. They often yield pocketknives, tent stakes, and cordage, sometimes long lengths of 550 cord.

Check beaches and riverbanks for pocketknives, coins, jewelry, and snagged fishing lures, especially after water levels drop. You'll find the basics of a survival fishing kit in no time.

As you drive, watch the side of the road for hats. Most people never notice them, but I know a guy who watches for them and he has amassed a collection of at least several dozen hats of all kinds. Hats are important to include in survival kits and are useful for quickly masking identity or changing appearance.

Whether you are in the city or the wilderness, keep an eye out for medicine, medical supplies, shelter, improvised fallout shelters, campsites, tinder, firewood, water sources, food sources, plants, animals, fish, birds, specific vehicles, sand, clay, and other materials. Note where to find the things

you may need someday. Everything you need to survive is all around you.

I watch the ground when I walk and make lockpicking and restraint escape tools from little bits of metal I find on the ground on sidewalks, roads and in parking lots: aluminum cans, street sweeper bristles, windshield wiper inserts, hair clips, bobby pins, paper clips, binder clips, and so on.

4. Dumpster Diving

The things Americans throw away is simply unbelievable to many immigrants. I routinely see video on social media by immigrants showing people back home the incredible finds that Americans throw away when they move or upgrade.

I say dumpster diving, but many times people will put the best stuff outside the dumpster or out on the street, often with a sign, so you don't even have to reach into a dumpster.

I found a whole set of cast iron cookware this way and also my dining room table and chairs. The cookware needs a little rust removal and reasoning but would cost hundreds of dollars in the store. I bought less than \$20 of Naugahyde and used some staples to reupholster the metal framed chairs, but that saved me hundreds of dollars too.

Keep a sharp eye out for anything made of reclaimable wood.

5. Online Downloads

Every serious survivalist I know has both a digital survival library and a paper survival library. Of course you can't find every book you could want for free online, but you *can* find tons and tons of important survival resources to download for free.

Here are a few that I use:

- **gov** – The US Geological Survey has tons of useful maps that are a must have. Topographical maps in various scales are essential to land navigation and hazard maps are essential to emergency planning.
- **Military Manuals** – Military manual have loads of useful survival information. Important subjects include survival, fieldcraft, sanitation, water treatment, first aid, medicine, convoy tactics, pack animals, reconnaissance, security, construction, improvised munitions, marksmanship, sniping, surviving radiological and nuclear attacks, and more. Loads of useful survival information, free for the taking.
- **com** – Archive.com has tons of books, documents, and files and many of them be downloaded for free. Finding things available for free download on archive.com takes persistence, but it has been well worth it for me. In particular it has a wealth of military manuals, reloading information and books, including many field guides on wild edibles and other important topics.
- **Project Gutenberg** – This website features books that have become public domain. This usually happens when they are old enough that the copyrights have expired. Fortunately, the same gardening techniques and knots that people used a hundred years or more in the past still work just fine and sometimes those old books can teach you things most folks have forgotten.
- **Survival Download Link Libraries on Survival Websites** – Most download libraries on survival websites try to skirt liability by simply providing links to downloads on other websites. A lot of them will be military manuals or FEMA downloads but if you keep at it, you will find some useful documents. Depending on how well the library is maintained, you may have to deal with a lot of dead links, requests for access, which will probably be denied, but I have found some useful downloads on these types of libraries.
- **Survival Download Libraries on Survival Websites** – A few

sites actually host at least some of the files on their websites. These are typically much more reliable. At the time of this writing, ardbark.com is one such site, but they come and go.

6. Free Samples, Complimentary Items, Swag

Everybody knows that you can grab a handful of napkins, salt or condiments at a fast-food counter, but I have also found very nice toiletry kits from airlines, small bottles of moisturizing lotion from big box stores, children's Tylenol, Ibuprofen, and oral electrolyte powder from medical clinics, matches, and more.

It's better to be practical and have a complete kits and caches than to come up short when things go sideways because you were a gear snob who never found the perfect kit. The perfect kit is any kit that saves a life or prevents suffering.

Sources for Cheap Stuff

If you can't find what you need for free, finding it cheap is the next best thing.

7. Facebook Marketplace, Craigslist, Community and Church Social Media Groups, etc.

Just as people give things away on Facebook Marketplace and similar sites and groups, even more people sell things that are heavily discounted.

8. Good Will Stores, Yard Sales, Estate

Sales, Classified Ads and Auctions

Thrift stores are great places to find deals on pre-owned preps, such as clothing, boots, duffle bags, backpacks, candles, camping gear, kitchen knives, pots, and books.

I have found high quality tools and camping gear and firearms at garage sales, and I once scored a Franchi SPAS-12 shotgun for \$320 at a police auction which was easily worth \$1,000 at the time. I just saw one for sale for \$3,645. Collectable firearms hold their value very well. Unfortunately, many police departments are now paying taxpayer dollars to destroy firearms instead of saving money by auctioning valuable property.

9. Dollar Stores, Discount Stores, Gun Shows and Flea Markets

Thanks to coupons, customer loyalty programs and loss leaders, you can score some great deals on perfectly serviceable survival gear.

10. Barter

Sometimes you can barter for survival gear. I once bartered some credit toward computer equipment for a SIG P220 .45 caliber handgun. This type of barter is a good deal because SIGs either hold or increase in value while computers rapidly depreciate.

11. Cheap Mulch from City Green Waste Facilities

Harbor Freight has an electric chipper/shredder than can turn small branches into mulch for your garden and landscaping.

Repurposing Household Items

My wife grew up poor in Brazil. She couldn't reach for her wallet to solve her problems. That wasn't an option. She learned to improvise, adapt, and overcome and developed superpowers when it comes to repurposing household items.

Survival is all about DIY. So, if you don't already, start reaching for your toolbox instead of your wallet and it will improve your survival skills.

12. Buckets and Containers

Watch for buckets and containers that can be repurposed. Some businesses regularly discard buckets and useful containers.

Survivalists need buckets and containers for gardening, making gravity filters, showers, and bucket toilets. We need them to collect and preserve foraged food, waterproof tinder, collect, settle and treat water, cook food, make stoves, and it just goes on and on.

My wife is a great example. She never lets a useful container go to waste.

13. "Old" Clothing and Equipment

Anytime I upgrade clothing or equipment, I see if serviceable items can go into an emergency cache stored offsite in case my home burns down or something and I have to start over. For me, this is an expression of the principle of "not keeping all my eggs in one basket."

14. Once-Fired Brass

With the price of ammo nowadays, be sure to pick up reloadable brass anytime you shoot. It can be decapped, cleaned, prepared, reprimed, resized, and reloaded. Even if you don't reload today, you might some day or you can sell your once-

fired brass to someone who does and use the money to buy more ammunition, recovering some of what you fired. You could also barter it for reloaded rounds.

15. Compost and Mulch

If you have a yard, green waste from your yard can be chipped and shredded into mulch and table scraps and green waste can be composted for use in the garden. This is important to your self-reliance, because after the soil mixture has been prepared, compost and mulch are the main things you will need to add to a Square Foot Garden.



Not

only will you get healthy homegrown food out of the deal, you will also be helping the planet since green waste accounts for 25% of everything the average North American home sends to the landfill. (Cullen & Johnson, 1992)

Summary

These three principles will get you the most bang for your preparedness buck:

- Don't buy what you can get for free.
- Don't pay a premium for what you can get at a discount.
- Don't buy anything that can be repurposed from household items.

Other Preppers Are Reading Now:

>> [The Secret Water Source Even the Bible Talks About \(VIDEO\)](#)<<

>> [How to Shield Everything You Own from the Next Grid Collapse](#) <<

>> [The Herbal Cure Collection Doctors Don't Want You to Know](#) <<

>> [How to Build a Survival Stockpile That Lasts \(VIDEO\)](#)<<

[The Backyard Farm That Works Anywhere](#)



>>> [Watch the Video](#)

References

Cullen, M., & Johnson, L. (1992). *The Urban-Suburban Composter: The Complete Guide to Backyard, Balcony, and Apartment Composting*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

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<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/saving-money-emergency-expenses-2>

