

A Sharp Edge: Choosing the Best Survival Knife for Prepping and Self-Defense

There's a bit of a tendency to focus on firearms here in the prepping and survival community. That makes sense, when you think of it from the viewpoint of self-defense or even for hunting. There are no other weapons available to us that equal firearms, when it comes to these two areas of use. Others, such as bows, may come close; but they'll never equal guns. If they could, more armies and hunters would use bows, than rifles.

There's another area of weapons that gets a fair amount of attention in the prepping community: that's what we refer to as "alternate weapons." This broad category can include anything that can be used to inflict harm on another person, generally for the purpose of self-defense. The fascination with these alternatives is that, in a post-apocalyptic world, ammunition will be in short supply. With that being the case, it will be best to save it for times when it is truly necessary.

There are a few weapons that have stood the test of time, having been in use long before firearms were invented and still being widely used in modern society. The aforementioned bow is one which has, as well as the knife. Granted, the knife is also a very useful tool, crossing the boundary between these two areas. While knives are rarely used as weapons today, any knife can become a formidable one in the hands of someone who knows how to use it... especially in close quarters.



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Even so, for most of us, the knife is primarily a tool, rather than a weapon. Selecting the right knife and preparing it for use are essential survival skills. While any knife is better than no knife, having the right knife makes whatever job you're going to use it for easier. This means it might actually make sense to carry more than one knife, especially in a post-disaster survival situation.

I know that might sound a bit excessive; but it's actually not. I know people who carry more than one knife, using different ones for different purposes. They might have one just for eating, another for general tool work and another that's part of a multi-tool. That's not taking into account their hunting and fishing knives, which they only carry when they are hunting or fishing.

Carry the Right Knife for the Job

I remember watching an episode of some survival show, where a survival instructor took three city-slickers out into the wild on a survival exercise. At the beginning of the show, he "equipped" them with a few very basic things, including knives. Looking much like a guy selling knock-off Rolex watches on the streets of New York City, he opened up his coat to show a collection of various knives hanging on the inside. Each of the three selected a knife to use for the remainder of the show.

Of course, the selections of the men were laughable. One selected a large Bowie knife, just because it was the biggest knife available. Another selected a Karambit, a very

specialized fighting knife with a curved blade. The third selected a dagger with a double-edged blade. Honestly, I would hate to try and use any of those knives in a survival situation. The Bowie would be the best, but it's not very good for skinning game.

Basically, all three of those men chose self-defense knives, even the one who selected the Bowie. While none of them truly knew how to use their knives to defend themselves, they are armed to at least attempt to resist attack. The only problem is that those knives wouldn't be of much use for the survival tasks ahead.

Can you imagine trying to make a fuzz-stick to start a fire with, using a double-edged dagger? How about trying to clean and skin a squirrel before cooking over a fire, using a Bowie knife? There are so many different types of knives out there, because they have been designed to accomplish different purposes.

I don't want to get into a discussion about different styles of knives and their purposes at this point, as it would take more room than I have in this article. But I will suggest that you become educated about what the different knife blade styles were invented for, before making any decisions about survival knives. I will say this though, always go for fixed-blade, full-tang knives, whenever you can. They're less likely to break and ultimately more convenient to use, even if they aren't more convenient to carry.

Where You Carry is Important

Once you determine what type of knife or knives you need to be carrying, the next question is how you are going to carry it or them. The classic way of carrying a knife is in a belt sheathe, generally mounted to the opposite side of the belt from the pistol. That makes it convenient to reach, while keeping it out of the way of your draw.

If all you're going to carry is one knife, this makes sense. It may not be the best position for that knife, from a defensive point of view; but it's conveniently located for general use. It just makes sense, and having to switch the knife from your off-hand to your main hand isn't a big issue.

On the other hand, if you're going to have to draw that knife and use it to defend yourself, the time it takes to switch hands might just make it too late. Knife fighting is always at close range, meaning you don't have much time for the draw. Unless you can knife fight with your off-hand, you're going to be at a severe disadvantage.

Back when I was in the Army, we were still using the Alice gear. I carried my combat knife strapped upside-down to the left-side shoulder strap. That was a convenient place, offering me a fast draw, largely to its easy accessibility. Considering that I viewed that knife as a backup, in case my rifle jammed and the enemy was at close distance, a fast draw was important to me.

I also carried a pair of throwing knives, which were attached to the same Alice gear, but were over my right shoulder. Considering that throwing the knife required my cocking my arm to a position where the knife would be over the right shoulder, that was the shortest possible draw that I could get.

Other soldiers in my unit carried their knives in other convenient locations, such as in their boot or strapped to their left forearm. Both of these locations served to help conceal their knives, which was an added advantage. However, the boot is a slow draw, so I would only consider using that for a backup knife; not for my primary fighting knife.

Note that most of what I'm talking about here is the location of fighting knives. Utility knives, used as tools, don't have to be carried in a way where you can draw them quickly.

It's Got to be Sharp

Any knife is only good if it is sharp. For that matter, dull knives are actually more dangerous to use than sharp ones, as they are much more likely to slip, causing injury. Yet few preppers know how to get a knife truly sharp and even fewer include sharpening gear in their bug out bags.

I've actually learned more about the value of a sharp blade from woodworking, more than working with knives. Any cutting tool has to have a sharp blade or edge to cut well. This is even more noticeable with chisels and hand planes, than it is with power tools. A sharp chisel can be used to cut across the grain, "paring," powered by hand pressure alone. But a dull chisel is more likely to tear the grain, rather than cutting it, making a mess.

So, how do you sharpen a blade?

First of all, the type of steel used for the blade is crucial. Most knives today are made of stainless steel, which doesn't hold an edge as well as high-carbon steel does. Stainless steel is more brittle than high-carbon steel, making it lose its edge more quickly. Be sure to know what type of steel a knife blade is made of before buying. Check online for a reference to various types of knife steel and see how your potential knife's steel stacks up.

What is being sold today as "Damascus steel" is not the Damascus steel of ancient legend. It is merely a copy, intended to reproduce the characteristic look of Damascus steel, without consideration of how well the blade holds an edge. They are great for showpieces; but not for survival use.

Next, unless you have an otherworldly ability to hold your knife's blade against a honing stone, you really need some sort of sharpening jig. There are a number of differing kinds around, all of which are intended to hold the blade at a

consistent angle, while you're drawing it across the stone. This ensures that you're actually going to be sharpening the blade, rather than fighting against yourself, making a number of different facets. Hunting knives and pocket knives are sharpened at an angle of 22 to 30 degrees. Select an angle for your knives, and sharpen them consistently.



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I use both oil stones and water stones for sharpening. Water stones tend to cut steel more quickly, making the sharpening process faster. Regardless of the type of stone you use, you'll want to have several different grits, starting at about 400 and going up to 3,000 or 6,000. The higher the grit, the sharper your blade will be. But that takes more work, as you have to work your way up through several stages of grit to get there.

For survival, especially for a bug out bag, I'd recommend using a diamond plate for honing your knives, rather than a honing stone. Diamond plates are thinner, lighter and won't break. They don't require oil or water, so can be used anywhere.

Finally, consider getting a strop for finishing off the knife's edge. Old-fashioned barbers used to strop their straight razors every time, before using them. This would polish the edge of the razor, putting the sharpest possible edge on it. That extra step might seem unnecessary; but it will make it easier to cut and cut accurately with your knives.