Survival Uses of Ordinary Things

Survival isn't always about having the right gear and supplies. While there's a lot to be said for having good equipment to work with and a stockpile of food to eat, there are always situations where those things are not available. Worse than that, any long-term survival situation will exhaust our supplies, forcing us to become creative in what we do and how we use things. Who survives in those circumstances may very well be the most innovative person in using ordinary things, not who has the most survival gear.

Our homes are filled with an assortment of everyday items and some which are not so ordinary. By and large, we purchased those things to fulfill some purpose. Yet, the need for that purpose or even the item's ability to fulfill that purpose may fall by the wayside during a time of crisis. That doesn't mean that it is unusable, though; it just means that we need to repurpose that item, turning it into something we can use.

Everyone who has been around the survival community for any time knows that petroleum jelly and cotton balls can be used to make a very effective accelerant to start fires. Likewise, we've all heard of using steel wool and a battery as a fire starter. But what about everything else sitting around the house? Allow me to share some of my favorites with you.

Hair Bands

Hair bands have to have been invented for survival. I'm not talking about scrunchies, but rather the simpler elastic bands. They can be used for binding things together in your pack, as well as binding things to the outside of the pack. But perhaps one of the most important uses of hair bands is connecting sticks when making a shelter. Using bands is much faster and easier than tying knots in paracord, and the bands can be removed to be reused again and again.

Making Fireplace "Logs"

We all plan on heating our homes and cooking with wood when the power is out, but just where are we going to get the wood? Back in the early days of our country, when people heated with wood, they lived close enough to the forest to cut that wood and bring it back. Once we cut down the trees in our neighborhoods, what are we going to use?

I've been making my fireplace logs out of a combination of shredded paper, sawdust, and chopped-up leaves, soaking them down and then mixing them all. The slurry is poured into molds, something like bricks, and allowed to dry in the sun. While not a perfect solution, they burn well and reasonably slowly, providing heat.

Fire Accelerants

I mentioned using cotton balls soaked in petroleum jelly as a fire accelerant earlier, but that's not the only fire accelerant we have in the home. There are several household and garage chemicals that we have around the house, which are flammable. Any of them can be used to help start a fire. While we may not need that help most of the time, we probably will start a fire with damp wood.

Homemade Mosquito Repellant

Mosquitoes are a big problem anywhere, especially around bodies of water. They'll be even more of a problem when we can't run to the store to buy insect repellant. But this is one of the easier problems to solve. We can make mosquito repellant out of garlic, which is one of the best mosquito repellants. It's so good that Disney uses it to keep mosquitoes out of their parks.

To make garlic mosquito repellent:

1. Start by peeling and crushing four garlic cloves.
2. Place them in a closed container with just enough mineral oil to cover them up (at least one tablespoon).
3. Allow this to sit for a few days so that the mineral oil can extract the essential oil from the garlic.
4. Strain out the garlic, saving the mineral oil.
5. Mix it, along with a tablespoon of dish soap, into a pint of water.

This produces a concentrated mixture.

For use, dilute the concentrate at a rate of 2 tablespoons to a pint of water. Place in a spray bottle for use. This repellant can either be sprayed on your body or sprayed in areas that you want to keep mosquitoes away from. Take care, though, as the garlic won't just keep mosquitoes away; it could get rid of beneficial insects in the garden as well.

Use Vines for Cordage

Cordage is essential for survival. Who doesn't have a hank of paracord in their bug-out bag or survival kit, right? But what do you do when you run out of cordage? One of the best natural alternatives is vines. If you have vines growing anywhere in your yard, try breaking them by hand sometimes. You'll be surprised by how strong they are.

The one problem with vines is that some become brittle when dry, so you'll want to keep them growing without allowing them to kill everything else in your yard.

Flotation Devices

We buy a lot that comes in plastic bottles, especially if we buy bottled drinks. Those bottles usually are nothing more than a disposal problem once the contents have been used. But they don't have to be a total waste. Those bottles float, and if enough of them are tied together, they can be used as an emergency floatation device, like a life jacket. For that matter, if enough of them are tied together, they can be made into a small boat.

Snowshoes

Snowshoes aren't a big deal for most of us because we live in places where the snow is shoveled off the roads and sidewalks. But that's not going to be the case in a post-disaster world where snowplows aren't operating. It's even questionable whether people will bother shoveling their sidewalks without anyone getting after them if they don't.

Snowshoes work because they spread your body's weight out so that a larger amount of snow can support it. This keeps your body from sinking into the snow, something that could be very useful in a survival situation. Almost anything can do this, at least temporarily, including cardboard, as long as it was adequately supported.

To make your snowshoes, cut some thin branches (about ½" diameter) from a tree. You'll need enough branches so that they can be tied together to make ovals that are 1 foot wide and 3 feet long. Use paracord, duct tape, or vines to tie them together. These become the outer edge of the snowshoes. Fill in the area by crosshatching it with paracord, twine, or vines, spacing no more than one inch between strands. Tie them

to the toe portion of your boots, and you’re ready to go.

Alternative Bandaging

First aid is essential in survival, especially when we can’t just run off to the doctor or emergency room. In many cases, the first aid we can provide may be the only medical care someone receives.

Bandages are intended to do two things; stop the bleeding and keep the wound clean. Several different materials can be used for this, some of which should probably be kept in our survival first-aid kits:

- Tampons
- Feminine pads
- Cobwebs
- Old T-shirts and underwear (clean ones only, please)
- Saran wrap (for abdominal injuries, as the patient is being transported)

Carts for Hauling Stuff Around

Carts can be extremely useful in gardening, scavenging, and even bugging out on foot. But most people don’t have any such cart, or at least they don’t think they do. However, there are carts all around us, and I don’t just mean the ones at the grocery store, although that would work pretty well too. Some alternatives we might be able to use include:

- Child’s wagon
- Stroller
- Sled (while it wouldn’t work well on the street, it’s suitable for moving things around the yard)
- Hand truck
- Furniture dolly

Heating with Waste Oil

Heating is going to be a big problem in a post-disaster world. Another option, besides making fireplace logs, as I mentioned earlier, is to use waste oil for heating. If there's no gasoline and cars aren't running, there will be an abundant supply of waste oil sitting in those cars' engines. I'd recommend leaving a note if you drain it out.

Waste oil heaters work by dripping oil into a metal cup, where it is burnt. So the first thing that's needed is a container for the oil, from which the oil can be dripped at a steady rate, with a valve to control that rate. That has to be correctly aligned with the cup that the fire will be in so that it doesn't waste. Then a steady supply of air, to provide oxygen, is needed as well.

Some heaters provide air via a fan, but we need something that works without electricity. That can be accomplished in the same way that a rocket stove works. As long as the cup with the fire in it is raised from the bottom of the homemade oil burner and there is a hole (or holes) at the bottom for air to come in, convection will get air flowing in from the bottom and out through the chimney at the top.

Oil Lamps

While not as important, lighting will be an issue as well. Eventually, all our batteries will be used up, and we'll have burned up all our candles. But that doesn't mean we have to be without light. Oil lamps have provided light for centuries and can be made of almost anything. They can also burn a wide variety of liquids around the home, not just oil.

Some of the earliest oil lamps looked like a small dish or saucer. A piece of twisted cloth was used for a wick. The same idea will work for us. Cotton, which doesn't burn well, is ideal for the wick, and a saucer, small bowel, or teacup can

be used to hold the oil. Allow the wick to soak in the oil, leaning against the side of the container so that the wick is sticking up above the liquid.

Melee Weapons

Many medieval melee weapons were nothing more than modified peasants' tools. Battle axes, war hammers, and other weapons of the like were modified versions of those tools, made specifically for war. But peasants who were drafted into a nobleman's army probably weren't issued those custom-made weapons. Instead, they were expected to bring their tools to battle.

If it worked for them, it would work for us as well. Granted, I'd much rather have a handgun than an ax, but I've seen what an ax can do as a weapon. If I were at the point where I needed to be using a gun for close-range fighting, I would have no problem with the idea of using an ax.

Food Dehydrator

One of the most common means of preserving food is by drying it. Throughout known history, humanity has used a variety of means of drying food. The American Indians hung strips of meat on a framework of wood to dry it. People in the Netherlands spread out salt fish in flat woven baskets on their roofs. Today, we use electric food dehydrators, which are much more efficient.

But what about when the electricity goes out; how will we dry it then? If you've got a solar dehydrator, more power to you; that will work just fine without electric power. But if you don't, you can use your car as a dehydrator. After all, it gets plenty hot enough in most cars to darn near cook food, let alone dehydrate it. Not only that, but the car is a secure place to dehydrate that food, where you can lock it up to help keep people from stealing it.

Conclusion

The key to finding these survival uses of ordinary things is to think outside the box, seeing what an item can do rather than what it usually does. It’s all about form and function. What form does it take, and what role can that form do? It doesn’t matter if it looks funny; it only matters if it works. I’ll guarantee you; your neighbors won’t make fun of you using any of these in a post-disaster world. They’re much more likely to try copying your ideas. So let your creativity go wild and see what you can do with the things you have in your own home.