

Winter Food Budgeting for the Frugal Gardener



In the past, I always noticed a jump in our food budget over the winter months. You'd think that the summer with its frequent BBQs and outdoor game nights would put a more significant dent in the budget, but I've noticed the opposite.

In the summer, we get a lot of food right from the garden. Fresh greens, squash, and beans all make up a large portion of our dinner plates. Produce is in season, too, so even when we visit the grocery store, farmer's market, or sign up for a CSA, we're not overpaying. In the winter, the cost of fresh produce at the grocery store increases and without cold frames (here's hoping we can manage to build some for cheap this year!) we need to get creative with our food budget.

Tips for Food Budgeting

Here are some tips that I've utilized that I've found have made a considerable dent in our food spending.

- **Make a plan.** Meal plan when you can. Carve out some time during the week or weekend to plan for the week (or weeks) ahead.
- **Write down staple dishes.** I use a Google Sheet to write down regular dishes that can be customized depending on the ingredients we have on hand. Each entry is numbered so when meal planning, I use a random number generator and the picking is done for me. It helps with decision fatigue. Examples: tacos, protein salad, soup, etc.
- **Stock your pantry.** Having a well-stocked pantry before the winter months will help immensely. You won't have to spend on new spices or other staples.
- **Keep your pantry and fridge organized.** You'll waste less if you can see everything that you have on hand. Use clear containers in your pantry so you can easily spot what's running low. Being able to view your pantry's contents will help with meal planning, too.
- **Buy meat on sale.** If you are a meat eater, buy extra when it's on sale and freeze in portions.
- **Have a backup plan.** I have chronic migraines. So sometimes, I'm entirely out of commission. I can't get up from my dark cocoon let alone chop up veggies for dinner. On those days, it becomes tempting to order out. I try to budget for these instances. Another alternative is to have easy to make stuff on hand that's for these special moments. Frozen pizza, canned soup, etc.
- **Do what works for you.** I like to meal plan, but I hate meal prepping. So I don't ever waste time prepping weekly portions of food. I've tried it, and it just isn't my cup of tea. Do you prefer to shop weekly? Bi-weekly? Monthly with mini trips for staples like milk? Go with what you prefer. If you do something you don't

like doing, you're likely to ditch it and end up impulse spending at some point.

- **Set aside money for groceries.** Or use a budgeting app to keep track. Whatever your method, make sure you're sticking to your budget and make a note of why you didn't if you end up going over.
- **Plan for events.** Around the holidays, we always end up spending extra when hosting friends and family. That's fine. We just make sure to keep it in check and spend less earlier in the month.
- **Sign up for a CSA Basket.** CSA stands for Community supported agriculture and it's a wonderful way to support your local farmers. It also provides you with access to fresh locally grown produce. In my experience, signing up for a CSA has always been a great deal. We always end up with plenty more than we expected. This year, we were lucky enough to be involved with a winter CSA, and it's been a delight. Many farms are also more than willing to work with individuals on a tighter budget.

What are some of your must-follow food budgeting tips? I'd love to hear them. This weekend I'll hopefully be carving out some time to re-organize my pantry. I'm hoping the finished project will be worth posting about, so stay tuned for that. I'll be talking about how I organize my pantry, my must-have items, and where to find the best deals on organization tools for the pantry.

Garden Planning: Crop

Rotation



I've said it before. It's so important for a frugal gardener to plan. While gardeners without a strict budget can afford to be a little lax when it comes to planning, those who are looking to save money, in the long run, need to be meticulous and start thinking about their garden layout months, even years in advance. It sounds overwhelming, but taking a bit of time to sketch it all out will save you from a headache later on.

Today, I want to talk a bit about crop rotation. It's not often the first thing a gardener thinks about when drawing out plans for spring plantings. It's even less on the mind of the gardener with little space to spare. I know plenty of gardeners who have a permanent spot for certain vegetables. The tomato patch goes here. The beans remain here, year after year.

Unfortunately, relegating plants to the same area for each new gardening season is the perfect way to encourage pests,

disease, and deficiency problems. If you're wondering why your plants seem to be providing diminishing returns years down the road, a lack of rotation may be the answer.

How to Plan for Crop Rotation

The easiest way to ensure crops are rotated correctly is to arrange plantings according to vegetable families. Planting in family groupings makes it easier to handle pests, too.

Write everything down. Whether you're planning or planting, make a note of what's going where. It's easy to miss this step and forget about marking down what you're planting, but if you don't note it somewhere, you're unlikely to remember a year or two down the road. Once you've planted a specific vegetable family in a spot, you shouldn't plant it again in that bed for a minimum of three years.

How I Plan Out Crop Rotation

I arrange my four main raised garden beds into the four following families: brassicas (cabbage, kale, etc.), nightshades (tomatoes, peppers, eggplant), greens from the sunflower family & spinach relatives, and finally curcubits. I have a few other spots in my garden that act as miscellaneous areas where I can rotate out families or plant random stuff. This year, I actually plan to rotate my curcubit patch to one of those 'empty' beds so that I can grow a second bed of brassicas in my main garden area.

Here's an example of how I plan for crop rotation.

Last year my four main beds looked like this:

- **Bed 1:** Potatoes
- **Bed 2:** Kale & Collards (the rest of my brassicas were in one of the miscellaneous beds)
- **Bed 3:** Tomatoes, Peppers, Eggplant
- **Bed 4:** Squash

Plan for this year:

- **Bed 1:** Brassicas
- **Bed 2:** Tomatoes, Peppers, Eggplant
- **Bed 3:** Brassicas
- **Bed 4:** Greens (lettuce, spinach, etc.)
- In my two spare beds, I'll be putting squash and root veggies (carrots, beets, onions)

Next Year:

- **Bed 1:** Beets, Carrots, Onions
- **Bed 2:** Squash
- **Bed 3:** Greens
- **Bed 4:** Tomatoes, Peppers, Eggplant

Final Tip

When in doubt about what you've planted before in one spot, plant beans or some other non-demanding crop.

Planning is important, but don't take things so seriously that gardening becomes a chore. If you make a mistake, brush it off and make a note for next time.

If you're not sure about which plant belongs to which family check out this resource:
<https://extension.psu.edu/plant-rotation-in-the-garden-based-on-plant-families>

Frugal Family Activity: Snow

Cake



The forecast is calling for heavy precipitation in the next few days, right in time for the new year. Most of us are still in vacation mode and parents with children are probably wondering how they'll entertain their children while school is still out. Unfortunately, the cold means there's no garden to tend to, and unless you've installed cold frames and planned for a winter harvest, there's nothing to pick from the ground. On fair days when the weather has calmed, and the sun is out, it's an ideal time for outdoor activities like tobogganing, hiking, skating. What happens when the snow falls fast and fills the streets and yards to the brim, though? Some stay holed up inside with a good book. Others play games or enjoy binge-watching Netflix. On days like those, there's no opportunity to dig in the dirt. But whether you're a parent wanting to entertain the kids or an adult looking for something different to do, there is one thing you can harvest after a winter storm. Snow!

My mother was, once upon a time, a preschool teacher. She

still works with children and is a true kid-at-heart. I was recently reminded of an activity she used to do with her students and one that we would do at home. When the snow was fresh, we'd pop outside and find an undisturbed mound of the stuff and 'harvest' it for baking.

Yes. You heard that correctly. We'd bake a snow cake. The texture is dense, like a pound cake, and the taste was never really it's shining attribute. But the fact that we were baking with snow was the real spectacle. I asked my mother to share her recipe with me so I could share it with you today on this New Year's Eve. It's a fun recipe to try with kids, and it sure beats feeling bummed about the lack of warm gardening-ready weather.

Snow Cake

- 1 cup of sugar
- 1/2 cup of butter (margarine can be substituted)
- 1/2 cup of milk
- 2 tsp baking powder
- 2 cups of flour
- 1 cup of snow**

Directions

- Preheat oven to 350F
- Mix all ingredients until batter is smooth
- Pour into a baking pan of your choice
- Bake for 30 to 40 minutes
- Remove from oven and let cool
- Add your favorite icing

***Make sure to scoop up fresh, clean snow.*

Please feel free to share photos of your snow cake or stories of making this recipe with your kids I'd love to see and hear them.

A Frugal Side Dish Recipe for the Holidays



I wanted to share a simple, easy, inexpensive side dish recipe with you just before the holidays. I'm always disappointed how little vegetables end up on the table this time of year. We give all the glory to the main dish, but what about the humble vegetables? I think they're a particularly important part of a holiday feast. They're tasty, filling, and provide plenty of vitamins and nutrients. Packing your table and plate with lots of veg is also the perfect way to avoid a food coma. It's not just about being healthy, though. Vegetable side dishes are easy to make and don't usually cost that much. Having trouble sourcing produce that isn't pricey? Choose frozen or canned

vegetables over fresh. Better yet, plan in advance and have frozen garden vegetables on hand in the freezer. You can delight your guests with fresh tasting produce grown right in your yard!

Peas are an easy vegetable to freeze, they go well with nearly any main protein (or a tofu loaf or nut roast if you're vegetarian or vegan), and they're relatively inexpensive and super easy to find in the grocery store frozen section should you not have any garden peas on hand. We used to eat canned peas often around the holidays, but now I always cook this dish. It's extremely simple but feels fancier than plain peas from a can.

Braised Peas

Serves 4

Ingredients

- Broth (chicken or vegetable) – enough to cover the peas
- 2 cups of peas (frozen)
- Half an onion (diced)
- 1 tbsp Butter or olive oil
- Salt and pepper to taste

Directions

- Saute onions until translucent in a saucepan with butter or olive oil
- Add peas and broth to saucepan
- Simmer until peas are cooked through
- Add s&p to taste
- Use a slotted spoon to serve peas

Do you have any favorite vegetable side dishes that you serve when you're entertaining? I'm also fond of a good salad with a hearty meal and root vegetable mash.

Wishing you a happy holiday season!

Please let me know if there are any burning garden questions you'd like answered in the New Year. I'm so excited to start planning out the new gardening season, and I hope you are, too!

Another Plant to Look Out for This Season: The Christmas Cactus



Last week I talked a bit about poinsettias and why they're a great plant to grab around the holiday season. This week, I thought of another easy-to-source plant that pops up around

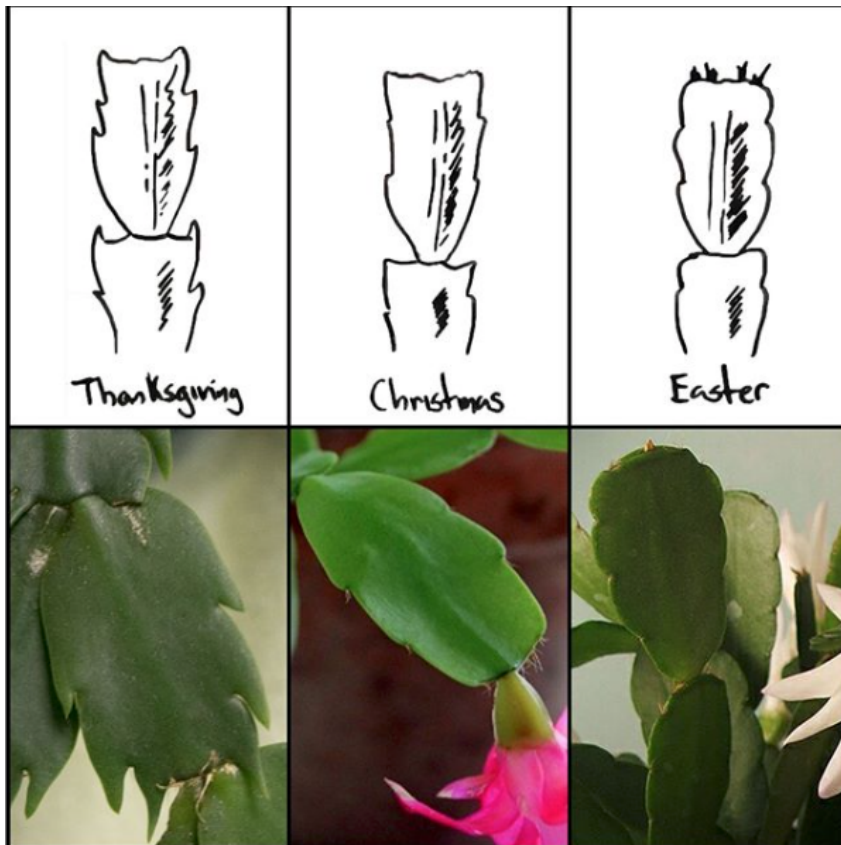
this time of year. The Christmas Cactus is a lovely tropical plant with succulent leaves and pretty flower buds that bloom right about now. Why do I recommend it? First, it's appearance. It's beautiful and exotic-looking. Next up? It's budget price tag! And for us frugal gardeners, that's the best part. During the holidays, you'll find these plants for cheap at your local nursery or supermarket. Be careful when shopping, though. Here are a few things to be on the lookout for when picking out a new plant-friend to bring home. These rules apply anytime you're buying plants, especially if they're discounted or not coming from a reputable nursery.

- **Scrutinize the leaves.** Don't purchase a plant that has browning leaves or foliage that looks unhealthy.
- **Look out for insects.** Little flies might hitch a ride to your home and infect other plants. If they're flying around the area, it might be wise to skip the purchase and seek your Christmas Cactus elsewhere.
- **Price.** Don't pay extra for fancy pots and don't let anyone rip you off. You should be able to find these for well under \$10.

Christmas Cactuses are easy to keep alive well past Christmas. A little humidity is helpful, which is why I house mine in my well-lit bathroom.

Don't Be Fooled

Did you know that Christmas Cactuses are sometimes mislabelled? It's no surprise since different holiday cactuses look very similar. The Epic Gardener recently posted a handy guide to identifying your plant.



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structure of the different types of holiday cacti. Keep in mind you will still see different looking ones, because all holiday cacti are cultivars and hybrids from the relatively few species of *Schlumbergera* and *Rhipsalidopsis* found in nature.

- Thanksgiving Cactus (*Schlumbergera truncata*): Hooked, claw-looking edges. The most common one sold at nurseries and often mislabeled as Christmas Cactus.

- Christmas Cactus (*Schlumbergera bridgesii*): Smaller, smoother appearance and counter-intuitively one of the harder ones to find.

- Easter Cactus (*Rhipsalidopsis gaertnerii*): Smooth leaves with a bristly appearance to them.



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via: Instagram

I love buying plants. I bring them home regularly, and I often find myself sticking them in my cart when I'm at the supermarket doing groceries. If you're like me, though, and don't want your plant obsession to hurt your wallet, consider picking up plants during peak holiday moments. Around Christmas, Easter and even Valentine's Day you might be able to find plants heavily discounted or for a steal. That's not always the case, of course. Around Valentine's Day, bouquet prices skyrocket. For Mother's Day, flowers fetch high prices. But if you're not in a hurry and have a good eye, it's not hard to spot plant finds in the most unexpected of places.

Don't Throw Out Your Poinsettia!



The holidays have arrived, and all I see everywhere are poinsettia plants. In fact, I've already been gifted one! It's a lovely plant that brightens up a room with a bit of cheer. I find it odd, though, that we only see these pretty plants around December. You blink, and they're gone. Every year, I seem to impress family and friends by the sheer fact that I keep my poinsettia plant alive longer than anyone else. No one I know keeps theirs past January 1st. I imagine garbage bins across town are filled with them. A graveyard of poinsettias. So, what's the trick? There isn't much of one. Just treat it like any other houseplant. Don't neglect it! I think that's the trouble. People perceive these plants as disposable and temporary, but they don't have to be. They're attractive plants and surprisingly cheap in-season. Wait a little and when all the holiday fuss has died down, and you might be able to snag one at a deep discount.

A few tips

Still skeptical about whether you'll be able to keep your poinsettia alive? Here are some pointers for nurturing your plant.

- **Poinsettias love lots of sun.** Many folks probably don't put them in an ideal location because they're not thinking about long-term survival. Make sure to choose a sunny spot for your plant.
- **Water frequently, but allow the soil to dry between waterings.** This is actually something I do unintentionally, and it works wonders. Make sure there's somewhere for water to drain, though.
- **Keep it away from cold windows and drafts.** Cool temperatures are bad for this plant. Don't stick it right by a window and avoid placing it at your home's entrance.
- **Provide it with a humid environment.** The poinsettia is a tropical plant, so it prefers humidity over dry conditions. The easiest way to provide humidity is to bring it into the bathroom while showering. If your bathroom gets sun, you can even make it a permanent home for your plant.
- **Re-pot it.** Unless you purchase a poinsettia with a large planter, you'll need to re-pot it to keep it alive since many store-bought plants are crowded into small containers.

Not even sure why you'd want to keep one alive past the new year? Maybe red doesn't fit into your regular decor. Poinsettias are available in other color variations including pink and white. I'm particularly fond of the white variety. The plant will fit in seamlessly with the rest of your houseplants. With a little bit of patience and allowing for periods of total darkness, you may even successfully re-bloom your poinsettia just in time for December 2019.

What's a Frugal Gardener to do in the Snow ?



Where I live, the snow has arrived and is here to stay. It's been a month or so, now that we've begun to shovel our walkway and donned our boots when heading outdoors. A month where I was happy to take a break from thinking about gardening tasks: I think a break is necessary for any hobby. It allows you to refresh and come back to it newly excited. But what are you do when you're ready for the break to end?

Thirty days later and I'm itching to dig in the dirt, but the ground is frozen, and it's not about to melt anytime soon. Boredom can be either a blessing or a curse. Here's how I make the most of my gardening downtime.

Take Advantage of the Rest Period

If you're in an area where winter signals the end of the season, here are some ways to keep entertained.

- **Find another hobby** – take up a new activity to spend your time when the temps drop below zero. Knitting, puzzling, reading, or browse your municipality's website to find free or low-cost gardening-related conferences to attend.
- **Scroll through Instagram** – Lucky gardeners in warmer climates are still enjoying lush, green crops. There's no shortage of inspiration and photo-entertainment on Instagram. You might even gather ideas for next year.
- **Clean** – You've heard of spring cleaning, but as a gardener, I often find myself tidying up more often in the winter so that I'm all organized when warmer weather arrives.
- **Learn something new** – Even the most seasoned gardeners can afford to educate themselves about new techniques or new plants they've never grown. Look for free online webinars or ask around to see if there are any in-person educational events in your town.
- **Gather and build** – With a bit of extra time on your hands, it's the perfect time to look around for supplies. Ask friends and family if they're throwing anything away that might be useful for your garden. Building supports and beds now will save you time in the spring.
- **Focus indoors** – Take stock of your indoor plants and make sure they're getting the attention they deserve. Consider starting an indoor garden for greens or herbs.
- **Enjoy the winter** – Stop lamenting about the end of the season! Embrace the colder weather and enjoy classic winter activities. Sledding, skating, building snowmen. Get outside, even if it's just for a walk. Get active, and you'll be primed to dig, haul, and plant in the new

year.

Whether you're still enjoying warm weather somewhere south or you're already buried in snow, think about planning your downtime from the garden. The winter doesn't have to be gloomy. Take stock of all the possibilities and use the rest period wisely. You'll come back to next year's garden fully re-charged.

Don't Throw Out Those Seed Catalogs!



The seed catalogs are arriving! It's like an early Christmas this time of year when I visit the mailbox and find a new catalog waiting for me. I am signed up to receive a bundle of them from various retailers. Even when I have plenty of seeds on hand for the next season, I love to flip through the brightly colored pages and read about different kinds of veggies, herbs, and flowers. When I'm done, though, I don't ever toss them in the recycling bin. I keep seed catalogs on hand for a few years, because I believe they are a fantastic resource and reference material.

Why I Keep Back Catalogs

I have a magazine folio filled with old seed catalogs. I usually keep them for around four years or so, until the folio gets full and it's time to purge. What's the point of keeping these? Here are a few reasons why.

- **Resource material** – Most seed catalogs aren't just designed to sell a product. They're painstakingly created – at least my favorite ones are – and contains tons of extra information that's incredibly valuable. Seed starting charts, growing guides, gardening tips, and more.
- **Seed info** – Sometimes, I need to go back and find information about a particular variety I planted that I no longer have the seed packet for. Is your seed packet gone or damaged and you can't read the planting info? Check the seed catalog!
- **Notebook** – Scrawl notes and stick post-its in the catalogs you receive. Instead of buying a new notebook, use seed catalogs to write down your observations, circle the plants you want to grow for the next year or year after.
- **Reading material** – Sometimes, when I'm bored without my garden in the winter, I'll flip through my collection of seed catalogs.
- **Inspiration** – When I lack garden mojo, I'll check out my collection of catalogs to get inspired again.

Of course, seed catalogs are useful if you're planning to order some seeds for next year. Nothing beats flipping through the pages and excitedly making plans and dreaming big. Check out your favorite seed retailer's website to sign up for their seed catalog. Most companies will mail them to you for free. Even if you don't plan to order anything this year, they're really great to have on hand.

Some seed retailers also create separate gardening guides that include product listings but are packed with even more growing information for gardeners. Often they're also available for

free or for a nominal fee.

Properly Storing Seeds



At the end of the season, my seed packets are typically all in a jumble. In the spring, I start things off with the intention of being ultra-organized, but as the season progresses, I don't always have a spare moment to store everything correctly. I'm constantly needing to access seeds during the growing season as I succession sow and start seedlings to replace spent plants. Things, no doubt, get a bit messy, and conditions aren't always ideal.

Now that winter is basically here, it's time to sort and organize seeds in anticipation for the arrival of seed catalogs. It's also time to think about storing seeds for the

long cold season ahead. It's a must for a frugal gardener. ed storage

Organizing

First, I sort through my current seed stocks to see what I have on hand. Is there anything that's past it's prime? Any empty containers or seed packets? I take note of those when the time comes to put in seed orders.

I like to keep all the information about my seeds in a Google Sheet. I can easily edit and make notes not only about whether I'm running low on a particular seed type but also about the time it takes for seeds to germinate and whether I've had luck with certain plants during the previous year.

I also take the time to consider what I plan to do with my garden in the new year. I keep the seeds I'm eager to plant within easy reach.

Storing

There are so many options for storing seeds. I used to use little laboratory jars I purchased for cheap on eBay to sort my seed supplies. The process was tedious, but it was very neat and organized. Everything was locked up in airtight containers, and everything remained very fresh. I still have some seeds in these containers, but I've gone back to keeping them in their packets for easy reference to planting and maturity info. It's also less time-consuming. Prolonging freshness requires:

- A dry location (airtight if possible)
- A dark spot out of direct sunlight
- A cool ambient temperature

Storing your seeds with care will ensure you can use them past the packet 'expiry' date. Proper seed storage will save you money in the long run, so you're not having to re-purchase the

same seeds each year just because they've gone stale.

Come back next week for a post about seed ordering and how to tackle those incoming catalogs.

Don't Throw Those Pots Away!



The pre-winter cleanup continues. I got a jump on tidying things up in the garden when the weather forecast began calling for below zero temps, but there are still things to organize as the threat of a snowstorm looms nearer.

It's now time to clean up lingering potted plants that were happy with the cooler fall weather. Some were gifted to me, others I left on the porch because I knew they'd survive the lower temperatures. A non-frugal gardener might just toss those dead plants in the compost and recycle the pots. But if

you're frugal minded, you'll see tons of potential for those containers.

Why Keep Them?

I keep those pots around for a few reasons, even if they're a little dirty or the wrong size for my current needs.

- **For planting next year.** I use them as containers for herbs or for plants when I've run out of room in my main garden beds.
- **For seed starting.** If I have lots of small pots laying around, even the flimsy kind, I don't toss them. I hoard them, actually. Starting plants indoors requires multiple stages of transplanting, and I like to have a variety of pot sizes on hand to ensure none of my seedlings become root bound.
- **For transporting supplies.** I always like to have a few medium sized pots on hand – preferably sturdy ones – to lug around dirt or other gardening supplies. Without the budget for fancy buckets and pails, I rely on cheap repurposed containers.
- **For indoor potting.** Have multiple containers on hand is useful for when you bring home indoor houseplants that might be stuck in too-tiny pots.

You also never know when any current pots are going to fail you. Even good-quality sturdy pots crack, break, or get knocked over by sneaky squirrels. In a pinch, an old recycle plant pot will house your homeless plants should such a situation arise.

Sanitize Them First

Before re-using containers, be sure to wash them to prevent spreading disease or pests. Think they look clean? Don't risk it. It's no fun to lose all your seedlings at once.

There are two ways you can sanitize pots so you can use them for other purposes.

Dishwasher – This is my preferred method because it's efficient and I'm sometimes lazy. The heat alone will help kill pathogens and bacteria, but you can pop in some dishwasher detergent for extra cleaning power. Use the top rack for delicate pots. I use this method to clean my seedling trays each year, too.

Bleach Bathtub – Add a tiny bit of bleach (a capful should do the trick) to a tub full of hot water and let your pots soak for a little while. Scrub them off if need be. Dry them and return them to your potting station.

There's no reason to trash perfectly good pots. Whether they're made of plastic, ceramic, or stone, it's always useful to have extra containers on hand. Save cash and keep your gardening eco-friendly by saving containers from the trash bin.