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When it comes to budgeting, the old ways are the best

Using up leftovers? Sewing our own clothes? The money-saving tips of the past are just as relevant today

Be it due to war, recession or a non-existent state pension, Britain's older generations are far more likely than the rest of us to have first-hand experience of real shortage. Today, some 2.1 million pensioners are living in poverty, so having a few less pounds to spend every week is a walk in the park in comparison.

For many retirees there is nothing optional about living on very little money, but going "old school" for tips on a cheap lifestyle is very in vogue right now, and taking a few leaves out of the old-fashioned, hardcore, book of frugal living could be the future for everyday saving for the rest of us.

The clever consumer

Modern families throw away an average of £150 worth of food every year, according to consumer group Which?, and many of us admit to binning far more, particularly if ready meals and pre-prepared foods have been left languishing in the fridge.

Going back to our roots by shopping locally and frequently for the things we need, cooking from scratch, planning meals in advance, properly storing food and cooking with leftovers could banish the expensive habit of wasting food. And search out tips to maximise the use for your meat and vegetables, such as rolling citrus fruit on a hard surface to get the most juice out of it.

"My granny never wasted anything," says Ed Bowsher, a financial expert at money website Fool.co.uk. "If there was a tiny bit of meat left, she'd make a stew. Or put it in a sandwich the next day. But these days we throw out 6.7 million tonnes of food each year. If we plan our shopping and cooking carefully, however, we needn't waste a crumb."

Vegetables are far cheaper than meat so why not go vegetarian – at least for a few days a week? With the right range of fruit and veg, dairy products and dirt cheap lentils, a balanced, leaner diet could be easier to maintain than a meat based one, and could even help you shift a few pounds in weight as well as save those coins. Make the most of the new-fangled luxury that is your freezer by cooking in bulk and freezing it.

If you can't face a meat-free day or two, why not embrace the growing trend of cooking with cheaper, more unusual cuts such as mutton, or even trotters. If it's good enough for Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, it's good enough for the rest of us. Resurrect the old skill of haggling for the best cuts for the best possible price and become a loyal customer. Going back to the same independent butcher could eventually earn you a nice extra cut for your loyalty.

If things get really tough, and you're feeling adventurous, the revival of foraging for food from the wild is going strong, even among city dwellers. What about nettle soup, some wild berries, garlic or mushrooms, and, if you can catch one, a grey squirrel? Make sure you know what's edible and what's not, and that you're not trespassing or otherwise breaking the law during your foraging. Only pick species that are common and which you are familiar with. Like so many things in life, if you don't know what it is, don't put it in your mouth. "How to" guides, cookery courses and advice websites are springing up that can help you find your feet. But if you're not quite ready to go out rambling for dandelions, growing your own – or even rearing animals for meat – could be the answer. Growing your own veg can save as much as £1,500 a year. The Royal Horticultural Society is a good place to start; see www.rhs.org.uk for advice on making the most of your garden.

Meanwhile, turn staying in into the new going out. Rediscover the art of the dinner party with everyone bringing a dish, rather than heading to a plush restaurant, and trade that chic but pricey bar for the fun of home-made cocktails. Very few people had cars until the end of the 20th century, so if you do go out, walk, take public transport or hitch a lift with friends.

Make do and mend

One of the biggest lifestyle changes over the last century has been the increase of disposable items. But re-usable razors, nappies and refillable bottles of beauty products are much cheaper per use than the single-use wipes, blades and baby products. If something breaks try to fix it first before you add to the landfill – and your debts – by forking out for a brand new replacement.

Getting out your grandmother's knitting needles and sewing machine and making your own clothes is cool again, and groups like Stitch'n'Bitch (www.stitchnbitch.co.uk [<http://www.stitchnbitch.co.uk>]), a social network for knitters, have never been so popular. Embrace the hand-me-down culture you thought you'd escaped as a child by buying second-hand clothes, either online through sites like eBay, or in charity shops. You're the only one who will know that they're "nearly new".

"There was always more you could do with old items," says Audrey Carver, 90, from Epping Forest. "Sheets that were worn down the middle could be turned into pillowcases, then handkerchiefs, and finally cleaning cloths and rags. And when we made clothes we would use one layer of material rather than the two layers you get now."

"It must be hard if you are on a fixed income now," she adds. "These things are fun for a while, but become harder long term."

If you are on the look out for a new item, do your buying slowly, shopping around for the best possible price, and consider paying a few more pounds for a robust, longer lasting product rather than something plastic but inevitably short-lived.

Use your new-found domestic skills to make yourself a draft excluder out of old clothes or bits of cloth. Hang your clothes up to dry rather than using the tumble dryer. Put an extra jumper on instead of whacking up the heating, and turn lights out in rooms you're not using.

Nor is it essential to splash out on expensive cleaning products – just raid your cupboards. Lemon juice can help to get rid of grease and marks, and mixed with olive oil it can be used as furniture polish. Baking soda can get the grime off your bath and can clear your pipes if you put a few tablespoonfuls down the sink. Vinegar is mildly acidic and acts well as a cleaning product, particularly white vinegar. Spraying it on windows and wiping with an old newspaper will give you a smear-free shine better than most manufactured products. Mix equal parts vinegar and water in an old spray bottle to clean your surfaces as if you were a 21st-century Mrs Beeton. Or, better still, check out her own wise words at www.mrsbeeton.com [<http://www.mrsbeeton.com>] – you too could be a domestic god or goddess for less.

Traditional values: How to budget

Grandparents always seem to have a notebook on them, and now we know why. Work out your

incoming cash and your outgoing expenditure, create a budget and stick to it, writing down everything you spend in a month. It'll be an eye opener and will help you keep control of your spending.

Get a money box and put away your change for a rainy day. You'll be surprised how much it adds up.

Above all, have a saving goal. "One of the modern problems is the sheer abundance of things to spend our money on," says Peter Chadborn, an independent financial adviser for CBK Colchester. "Having a plan like paying off debts, or building up savings will focus your mind, and ensure you walk past the shops rather than saunter in.

"If you have to borrow money to buy something you can't afford it, and if you still need it a month later, it was definitely worth saving up for."



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