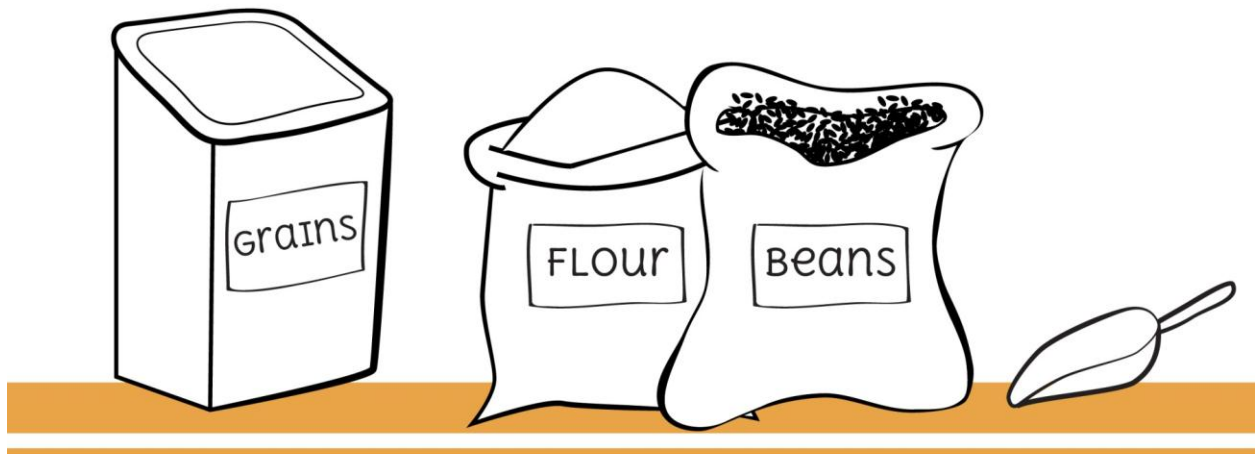


Buying in Bulk

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE



• By Andrea Muse • www.frugallysustainable.com •

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Chapter 1:

Why Buy in Bulk?

When it comes to buying in bulk, admittedly, the savings can be a hit or miss. For example, stocking up on the wrong things can lead to waste and spoilage. However, buying the right items in bulk at the grocery store, local health food store and co-op, or directly from the farmer can be a great way to slash your monthly grocery bill and save a small fortune.

But, that's not the only reason to shop bulk!

This beginner's guide to buying in bulk will walk you through the basics when it comes to purchasing items without all the packaging we have become so conditioned to expect.

Before we go any further, let's make a quick clarification—the buying in bulk that I am talking about should not be misunderstood. I'm not referring to shopping for bulk buys at the members-only, big box stores like Sam's Club and/or Costco. That's a whole different animal and represents a very different type of "buying in bulk"; one often associated with excess and waste. The bulk purchases I am referring to are the kind you'd find occupying an entire section or aisle at your local grocery or health food store. These bulk bins usually offer all sorts of foods -- from dried fruit to nuts to dried beans, grains, and herbs.

Buying in bulk is not limited to the grocery store. Often times, large sacks of grains and beans can be purchased directly from the farmer at a fraction of the cost, making bulk merchandise one of the most frugal ways to slash any grocery budget.

This style of purchasing food lays the groundwork for my monthly grocery budget and underpins my ability to feed our family. Many people question the benefits of buying in bulk and ask if it's really worth it. The simple answer is "yes"! But read these benefits and decide for yourself...

The Benefits of Buying in Bulk

There are countless benefits to buying in bulk. Many of the benefits look different for every family. In my own personal experience, I have found the following advantages undeniable, and they have fueled my love for buying in bulk.

Protects the Environment

When we purchase bulk items we are, as a by-product of our actions, reducing our carbon footprint. By eliminating the need for wasteful packaging, buying in bulk lessens the amount of trash that ends up in garbage dumps. Likewise, the transportation of goods is simplified, thereby easing the burden of CO₂ emissions.

Saves Money

When done correctly, buying in bulk can save an average family up to 50% on their monthly grocery budget. It allows me the freedom to buy products that would be undeniably more expensive if purchased in smaller amounts. For example, organic pastured meats suddenly become more affordable when purchased in bulk, directly from the farmer.

Saves Time

Buying in bulk allows me to avoid daily, and even weekly, trips to the grocery store. Having what I need on hand at all times is a tremendous time saver.

Reduces Waste

The benefits of reduced waste when buying in bulk have been known for years. This method of purchasing goods allows the individual the freedom to determine an exact amount of food that is needed, decreasing the quantity of food wasted when using pre-packaged products.

Helps to Promote Local Sustainability

Whenever there is an ability to obtain goods directly from the producer, in this case the farmer, it should be made a priority. Buying in bulk can provide even deeper savings when purchases are made straight from the farm. Planning ahead for storage of 25-50 pounds of grains and/or dried beans is worth the effort if it's food you and your family regularly eat.

Allows for Personal Accommodation

Plainly put, buying from the bulk bins offers you the opportunity to select the perfect amount of food. And there's no pressure to pay for something you won't use. Instead, you are able to choose exactly what you need; whether that's just enough cumin to spice up that new beef recipe or plenty of quinoa to make a big batch of salad.

Chapter 2:

How-To Buy in Bulk

As previously mentioned, this book focuses on two primary ways to buy in bulk.

1. Grocery Store Bins
2. Local Farms.

Grocery Store Bins

If it's your first time in the bulk section of your grocery store, have a look around and take note of all the offerings. Explore and see if the items that you usually purchase in packages or cans can now be purchased in bulk. Investigate a bit, and if you're like me, take the opportunity to try one or two new items each visit!

What's in the bins?

The foods in the bulk bins will vary from store to store. Some of the most common items you may find in the bulk aisle are:

- dried beans and legumes
- nuts and seeds
- cereals
- flours
- baking staples
- whole grains
- herbs and spices

- nut butters (You'll probably even get to grind your own!)
- pastas
- sweeteners
- teas and coffee
- variety of snacks

Some of the products may be organic or fair-trade, and some are not. They should be labeled accordingly, so be sure to read the labels carefully.

How can you find grocery store bulk bins near you?

Bulk bins are starting to appear everywhere. Even in my little neighborhood grocery store, we have a beautiful bulk foods section. This largely came about due to many, many requests from shoppers for this type of offering. You can also try looking at your local health food stores, in addition to searching for bulk co-ops in your area. To find a co-op in your area, visit the [Co-op Directory](#) or check out [Local Harvest's Food Co-op section](#).

Once you have located a market with a bulk foods section, check to see that the bins are kept full and that the food provided is fresh. Consider the area around the bins, is it kept clean and organized?

BYO...reusable bags or containers.

You will usually have plastic bags and brown paper bags made available to you for transporting your bulk items home. However, using these tend to produce a tremendous amount of waste, negating one of the benefits of buying in bulk.

It's completely acceptable to bring your own reusable bags or containers. [See this quick and easy tutorial](#) for making your own bulk food bags. By the way, the store may allow you to deduct the weight of your container. Be

sure to check with customer service prior to shopping in order to verify their procedure for “tare weight.”

Bring your own measuring cup and spoons.

If I need a specific amount of one item, I bring my own measuring cups or spoons. This way I know that I won't be buying more than I need.

Be sure to write down the PLU.

Each item will usually have a specific numbered code on the bin label. For example, you may see something like PLU #1234. You need to write down that code. This way the cashier knows what is in your container and how much to charge you. It is common practice for the store to provide you with the necessary items needed to write this down.

Label the storage containers.

No matter what type of container you are using, be sure to label it properly. This comes in handy especially when buying several different bulk items. There's nothing more frustrating than trying to remember what's in each container if they aren't labeled.

Don't sample the products.

Here's some basic bulk bin etiquette...I know it's tempting, but we really shouldn't reach inside of the bin for a sample. Let's not pass around germs unintentionally.

Most importantly, resist the urge to be intimidated by the bulk foods section. It really is fun and user-friendly. For the benefit of your wallet and that of our earth, start now by making a habit of buying in bulk!

Local Farms

Purchasing in bulk directly from the farmer, whether it's through farmer's markets or CSA's (community-supported agriculture), opens up a brand new world. The savings can be even more noticeable when you take out the middle man completely and purchase directly from the source.

This has become my preferred method of buying in bulk. Not only is there the joy of partnering with a local farmer, but I know that I am doing my part to sustain my community -- not to mention the benefit of knowing exactly where my items are coming from and the added nutritional value that comes from fresh foods.

Making the Transition to Buying in Bulk

The most frequent question I receive about buying in bulk is, "How do you afford these big purchases? Doesn't it seem like you're actually spending more money?"

The best advice that I can give to you is to start small. Yes, I am now buying 25 pounds of quinoa, 25 pounds of honey, 50 pounds of navy beans, and 50-100 pounds of tomatoes in season. But I didn't start overnight.

For me it started with just a few large purchases each month. I began to make small adjustments in my pantry, shopping habits, and cooking routines. First, it was 5-10-pound bags of items. That eventually led to 25 and 50 pounds of beans and grains.

Budgeting is vital when making the transition. I began saving \$10-\$15 each month, sometimes more. Soon enough, I had the money saved that was necessary to make my first bulk buy. Once I was able to make a couple bulk purchases, the savings really started to show up, and I began buying in bulk more consistently.

Another tip that I highly recommend is finding another family, or two, and go in together when purchasing large quantities of food. For example, the price of grass-fed beef is much higher than grain-fed. But when purchased in bulk, you can see a huge per pound savings on a side of grass-fed beef. Now I don't know about you, but it seems impossible to pay several hundred dollars up front for the initial purchase. When you are able to share the cost between a couple families, these types of purchases suddenly become realistic.

What can I purchase directly from the source?

In addition to the items that can be purchased in bulk from grocery store bins, purchasing from the farmer also allows for buying bulk foods such as:

- organic, pastured meats
- eggs
- seasonal fruits and veggies
- various dairy items
- oils
- apple cider vinegar
- honey

Finding Local Resources.

The problem most individuals have in purchasing local bulk foods is a lack of resources. The most beneficial resource for finding local foods is your community farmer's market. Just ask around! I have made countless connections with co-ops, farmers, and artisans -- all of whom were very happy to share their knowledge, and they helped me find exactly what I was looking for. Also, if you lucky enough to live near local Amish or Mennonite families, they may be able to help you locate excellent bulk foods.

I wish I could say that this method of purchasing food is a one size fits all type of deal. But it's not. Buying in bulk, directly from the source, is very much dependent on your local environment. You need to get out there and seek your own unique resources.

Online websites such as...

- www.LocalHarvest.org
- www.SlowFoodUSA.org
- www.EatWild.com
- www.HoneyLocator.com
- www.RealMilk.com
- www.AzureStandard.com

...all are excellent ways to connect with farmers offering the products you may be looking for. I have even found a farmer from whom I can purchase large quantities of organic wheat and dried beans on www.craigslist.org.

Chapter 3:

Storage Solutions

So, you've made it home with your bulk purchases. The question now becomes where the heck do you store all of this stuff, and what do you store it in?

If you took a look around my home, you may question the stacks of white buckets that line the wall of my closet or the gallons of water under our beds. It might be the burlap sacks in the corner of the pantry that cause you to wrinkle your brow in wonderment. Yeah, and don't mind the 2 ½-gallon bucket of honey next to the cabinet – there just wasn't anywhere else for it to go.

Bottom line, we make creative use of our small space in order to store the food necessary for our health and our budget.

A few bulk items (i.e. meat and dairy) come in packaging that makes them easy to store. For those items that aren't, the priority is to make sure that the storage container is as air tight as possible. Then you must consider, are these items for daily use or long-term storage? For the big bulk items, like the 25-50 pound bags of food, I prefer the white food-grade plastic buckets with the matching snap on lids. Often times, the individual or store you purchase the goods through can guide you in purchasing these storage buckets.

While food-grade buckets are efficient for long term storage of the large quantity of dried goods, they can be a bit awkward for daily use. For ease of use and for organization in the pantry, I love glass containers. These can

take a variety of forms depending on your personal taste and budget. What's important is that you have manageable access to things you need on a regular basis such as grain, tea, spices, flour, beans, coffee, etc.

Get creative with storage.

Everyone's situation is different; therefore, where to store your bulk items requires flexibility and ingenuity. Here are a few ideas that I currently use:

Sleep on it

No really! Get a set of cheap metal bed risers and create a make-shift pantry under the bed. We are able to store water, canned goods, and root vegetables under there, making valuable use of the real estate under the bed.

Put it in the closet.

Even though we have a closet-type pantry now, we haven't always had that luxury. When we lived in an apartment, we made due with our closet space. Still today, if you walked into my bedroom closet, you would see stacks of white buckets that contain a few of our bulk grains and beans. We don't mind!

Hang it over the door.

If you are in a rental and can't commit to making permanent changes there are so many options for hooks and things over the tops of doors. There are patterns for homemade fabric pockets or purchase cheap wire shelving to store canned goods, herbs, and spices.

Use the kitchen cabinets

In my kitchen, the cabinets are nearly to the ceiling. Since we have de-cluttered and removed a lot of the unnecessary junk from the cabinets, there is plenty of room for storage high up there. Even in the space between the ceiling and the cabinet, there are stores of grains!

Don't forget the garage.

A simple shelf in the garage can play host to scores of food items. In the winter months, I use the garage as I would a root cellar, often storing root vegetables, winter squash, onions, garlic and apples in Rubbermaid containers. Take a note of caution: Be aware and check your produce frequently for critters!

Store in a deep freezer.

Once you have experienced the joys of owning a deep freezer your life will never be the same! There are many options when considering the use of cold storage. No matter the size of your living space, there are a variety of freezers that can accommodate your needs.

Don't let the cost of a deep freezer scare you away from ownership. Just as with purchasing in bulk, freezers can be shared between families. Freezers can also be purchased on the cheap and second-hand off of [Craigslist](#) or from moving/yard sales. Give a good look around, and I promise you'll find one.

Can your surplus.

Canning is a nearly-forgotten skill that is thankfully beginning to experience a revival. Basic water bath canning knowledge will allow you to transform those seasonal bulk vegetables and fruits into useful food stuffs months past their harvest.

Final Thoughts

In conclusion, once you discover the beauty of buying in bulk and the advantages it can have on a strict, real food budget the sky is the limit. Yes, there is some creativity required when it comes to storage and finding where to purchase products. But in the end, making the transition to buying in bulk is well worth the effort. In the beginning, try to stay focused on your simple strategy for gradually adding bulk buys to your grocery shopping routine. In time, you will reap the rewards of a frugal, well-stocked, and healthy pantry.