

12 Frugal Shopping Tips for Thanksgiving

Preparing ahead of time and being flexible can help trim your costs.

With Thanksgiving fast approaching, many of us are already licking our lips at the promise of plump turkeys and flaky apple pies. But those of us who've hosted before know there can be a lot of time, energy and money that goes into laying out the Thanksgiving dinner table.

With a bit of thoughtful planning and a resourceful shopping strategy, however, you can tackle Thanksgiving dinner without spending a fortune. Below, we've listed 12 frugal shopping tips for saving money while celebrating the season of giving.

Start early. Thanksgiving planning should begin weeks before Thanksgiving eve. By planning ahead, you allow yourself time to hunt down the best deals and spare yourself the stress of rushing out to find a last minute item on Thanksgiving Day at a corner shop, where prices may be marked up. The more shopping and preparation you are able to do in advance, the more time you'll have on Thanksgiving to relax with family and linger over second slices of pumpkin pie.

Map out your menu. It's easy to go off budget when shopping for Thanksgiving, when grocery stores employ a variety of marketing strategies to encourage customers to spend. To avoid overstepping your budget, plan your menu carefully and create a shopping list of items you'll need. Divide your shopping list into non-perishables; items you can purchase straight away; and products you need to purchase fresh a day or two before Thanksgiving.

Narrow down your shopping list. Before heading to the supermarket, explore your pantry to see what items and supplies you already have. If you are inviting friends or family, call them up to ask if they would be willing to bring a side dish, appetizer or drink. Revisit your list to determine which items you can cross off.

Do your homework. In an effort to compete for Thanksgiving Day shoppers, grocery stores often offer some serious deals on turkeys and other Thanksgiving staples. Check out the websites of your local grocery stores, or compare paper ads and circulars to identify which stores have the best deals on which products. Keep an eye out for coupons and specials.

Take advantage of loyalty programs. You'll find that most major supermarkets have some kind of loyalty program that rewards members with exclusive deals and discounts. Safeway, Walgreens and Target all have attractive loyalty programs that are free to join. Take advantage of your store's loyalty program by signing up and using your card every time you shop.

Avoid premade and prepared products. When it comes to side dishes, sauces and desserts, it pays more to do it yourself. Prepared foods and premade items are typically marked up anywhere from 40 to 100 percent. If you allot enough time to simmer up your own sauces, make your own stuffing and bake your own pies, you can maximize both savings and flavor.

Don't shy away from generics. Buying generic or off-brand products doesn't mean losing out on taste. In fact, many generic products are comparable in every way to their name-brand counterparts in terms of ingredients and quality. Don't be afraid to go for generics over fancy labels, especially when it comes to dry goods, grains and frozen produce.

Be flexible. While planning a menu in advance is essential, you should be prepared to tweak your list according to what's on sale. For instance, if you had been hoping to make a cherry cobbler, but you find that cherries are pricier than you expected this season, there's no harm in swapping out cherry cobbler for apple pie on your menu.

Order cookware and gear online. In the weeks leading up to Thanksgiving, you can find great deals on cookware, serving utensils, tableware, Tupperware and other Thanksgiving gear on the Web.

Go for dollar store decorations. Dollar stores can be a treasure trove of deals on paper goods. You can find everything from paper plates to festive decorations at dollar stores for \$1 apiece.

Be resourceful with leftovers. Before the big day, make sure you stock up on Tupperware and clear out plenty of space in your fridge to make room for leftovers. Leftover turkey can be transformed into hearty stews, spicy curry and kid-friendly sandwiches; while mashed potatoes can be cooked into savory potato and shepherd's pies. Our personal favorite post-Thanksgiving recipe is cranberry-carrot muffins made with leftover cranberry relish for tartness and moisture.

Plan for next year. After Thanksgiving, harvest centerpieces, decorations and other Thanksgiving-themed merchandise is deeply discounted, as retailers clear their stores for holiday gear. Snatch up these deals today, and you can save yourself money and time next Thanksgiving.

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