Pantry storage basics

As the weather gets colder, trips to the grocery store typically become less frequent for my household. Before loading the pantry and cabinets with essentials to make it through winter months, it's a good idea to go 'back to square one'. This means taking everything out, and I mean everything out, so that you can see what you have and when items expire. Take note of what you do have, what you already have duplicates of, and what needs used earliest. This is not only the first step in organizing but also a budget saving strategy by preventing purchasing duplicate items or more than you and your family can use before the expiration date arrives.

Dry food storage basics remind you of the importance of keeping foods in cool and dark places. The ideal temperature for pantry storage is 50-70°F. Temperatures above this can cause canned goods, whole grains and flours, vegetables, olive oils, and vinegars to suffer. Foods stored on shelves closer to the ceiling may reach upwards of 90°F. Your stove and dishwasher are additional sources of heat in the kitchen and you want to do your best to keep shelf-stable food items away from these appliances. In fact, flours, especially whole wheat flour will have an extended shelf life if stored in the refrigerator or freezer.

Staples like flour, dry beans, pasta, and whole grains come in containers of all shapes and sizes and are often used in small quantities at a time. After opening these foods, it may be helpful to store them in uniform, clear containers that are labeled and dated. By putting these food items in airtight, food grade containers, moisture and pests have a harder time getting to them. If you begin this practice, be sure to use the contents until its empty before adding new. It's also best practice to wash a container before refilling. This helps keep food safe and prevent what's continuously left at the bottom from going bad.

Don't feel like you have to go out and purchase all new containers. Recycle and reuse various condiment containers and food jars after thoroughly cleaning and drying them. It's important to write the food's purchase date or when it was opened, expiration dates, and to tape cooking instructions to the outside of the container. Rice is a good example of a food that typically comes in a box or bag, not used all at once, and would fit into a recycled/airtight condiment container. Clean cardboard boxes can also be used to organize snack bags or irregularly shaped pantry items. By putting these items in boxes, you now create a 'pull-out drawer' for a shelf or pantry.