

Living a Simple Life with a Back Porch View

Dear Listener:

Thank you for stopping by for a visit at Living a Simple Life with a Back Porch View podcast! To make it easy, you will find a transcript of each episode. I hope you enjoy the visit!

Episode 70- Baking Ahead for the Holidays

Welcome back to the porch! Pull up a rocker and just cool off for a moment. This July heat just begs for this little bit of shade. We've been talking all this month about planning ahead for Christmas, and I think I've got a good start on what I will need to be doing.

So today, since it is so hot outside, I'm going to be inside getting a few of these items off my list. The first thing I want to do is start with all the things I can do in the kitchen. During the holidays, there is quite a bit of baking to do. It's too hot to turn on the oven, but that doesn't mean I can't get some prep work done.

I start by making a loose meal plan. I do one for the specific holiday, and then another one for the days leading up to it. It gets pretty busy around here during that time, so having that meal plan ready to go saves me time. I don't have to stop and think about what I want to cook while I'm in the middle of holiday preparations.

Once I have my meal plan done, I look to see what I can fix now. Casseroles are a perfect example. We like Enchiladas and Chicken and Rice casseroles, so when I make 'em, I double the recipes. I bake one for that evening, and the other one I wrap up and put in the freezer so it will be ready to bake during those days before the holiday.

I have to confess – I only have a few casserole dishes around here, and I use them often. So, I try to keep some of those foil pans handy. My biggest frustration with those is they bend really easy. I figured out that if I cut a piece of heavy cardboard the size of the top of the pan, I can put the casserole on that before I wrap it up for the freezer. It makes it sturdier and easier to stack. When I'm ready to bake it, I just take it out of the foil, remove the cardboard, and put the foil back on top. Works like a champ!

Today I plan on mixing up several different kinds of cookie dough. I'll start with Tea Cakes and Chocolate Crinkles because that dough has to be refrigerated first. Once those are chilling, I'm going to make Oatmeal Spice, Snickerdoodles, Chocolate Chips, and maybe some Peanut Butter.

From there, I'm going to make my life even easier during the holidays by going ahead and rolling that dough into balls. From there, I line my container with waxed paper and add a layer. Then I add another piece of waxed paper and add another layer. I keep going until I've used up all that dough, then put the lid on it, label it, and set it aside. Once I have all my cookies done that way, they go in the freezer.

When it's time to get my baking done, all I have to do is pull out a container, put them on a baking sheet and pop them into the oven. I have to confess – probably my favorite reason for doing it this way is I have less to clean up. And cleaning up after baking or cooking anything takes time I might not have during the holidays.

I may not get to it today, but I do the same thing with other desserts I want to serve. Things like my Miniature Cheesecakes work well when frozen. But I wait until the day I serve them to add the cherry or blueberry topping. I do the same thing with cakes or muffins and wait to add the icing until they have defrosted.

Now when it comes to breads and muffins, I will wait a bit before I do those. It's best to give them the shortest freezing time – maybe a couple of weeks or so, as they just seem to do better that way.

It'll take me most of today to do all those cookies, so tomorrow I'll probably start on mixing up some baking and spice mixes.

Even with living a simple life, some days get hectic. We need a shortcut or two just to make our time stretch. That's when those baking mixes come in handy.

Handmade baking mixes can be created to make biscuits, pancakes, muffins, cakes, brownies, and even cookies. When you run out of time, all you have to do is grab a jar, add a few wet ingredients, and then start baking. This not only saves time with preparation, but also with clean up.

The best handmade baking mixes start with your own recipes. Take Aunt Dot's Cheese Biscuits for example. I make so many of these, that it comes in handy to have the dry ingredients already mixed together. I store my biscuit mix in Quart zip top bags. When I am ready to make biscuits, I simply pour the mix in a bowl, add the buttermilk, and pat out my dough.

The trick to handmade baking mixes that are based on your own recipe is to mix all the dry ingredients together. If nuts or chocolate chips are part of the ingredients, as with brownies, just measure these out, place them in a sandwich-sized zip top bag, and place them in the bag with the dry ingredients.

Be sure to label the bag. If I am working with a cake, brownie, or cookie mix, I often write down the liquid ingredients and measurements, with baking directions, and place it in a sealed sandwich bag as well. When I grab a bag, everything I need to know is right there, and my preparation and baking time is cut in half or more.

The fun part of creating baking mixes like this is you can put it in a jar instead of a zip top bag, tie a ribbon around the top, add the recipe, and you have a great gift by itself, or you can add it to a gift basket.

The same goes for spice mixes. If you grow your own herbs, you can dry them individually and add them to a small jar. Or you can mix a few together, like Basil, Oregano, Thyme, Rosemary, Sage, and Fennel and create an Italian Seasoning. There are some spices that we can't grow here, like black pepper, salt, and cumin, so I use store-bought when I make my Steak seasonings.

And while I'm making my spice mixes, I also mix up some Taco Seasoning, French Onion Soup mix, and a few others. These I store in a canning jar with a tight-fitting lid. One thing I'll say about making seasoning mixes, it may seem a bit expensive to buy all the ingredients, but in the long run, it is cheaper. Take dried onions for example. I don't just use them for my seasoning mixes, but for other things as well.

But I do have to confess. I often dehydrate my own onions, bell peppers and celery. I use some of them individually for cooking, but I also mix the three together, add a few more herbs and spices, and create a Red Beans and Rice Seasoning blend.

The time I spend baking ahead during the summer saves me time when the holidays are approaching. I know what I'll be cooking for dinner every night, and since most of it will be waiting in the freezer, I can spend the time I would ordinarily be cooking doing something productive for the holidays instead. Which usually means finishing up a handmade gift, going to the neighborhood potluck, or even having plenty of time to volunteer where I'm needed.

There are three good reasons I do all of this in the summer. The first one is none of this has to be cooked right now. And the last thing I want to do is add heat to an already hot and humid day.

The next reason is I save quite a bit of time – and during the holidays, I would much rather spend that time with my family and friends than hanging out over a hot stove. And the third reason, which is probably my favorite, is I can use most everything I do now as gifts for Christmas.

Have you started your holiday planning yet? If you haven't, then be sure to add baking ahead to your list. It's a great way to not only beat the heat of the summer, but you'll have a big chunk of your gift giving list finished, just by spending a little time in the kitchen.

If you want to learn more about the topic at hand just visit my website at www.thefarmwife.com/. And if you want to know how to make some of these delicious cookies, desserts, baking and spice mixes, you can find them at www.thefarmwife.com/podcast - which is the Resource page for Living a Simple Life with a Back Porch View.

If you have questions or just want to stop in for a visit, you can do that through email at thevirtualporch@gmail.com. And be sure to subscribe – you don't want to miss a single conversation. I'll be sitting on the porch every Monday morning waiting for your visit!

Thanks again for stopping in. I will see you next week on Living a Simple Life with a Back Porch View. And while you are waiting on the next episode, grab that glass of refreshment, pull up a rocker, and sit back for a while. It's time to relax and enjoy.