

<b>01/26/09 - Pantry Staples for Crock Pot Cooking</b>
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**A slow cooker in the kitchen will pay for itself in no time. The time it saves when preparing meals makes it priceless. But, if you plan on using your slow cooker quite often, there are a few staples you may want to keep on hand to enhance your dishes.**

**1. ? Beans are a cheap source of protein that cooks well. Each bean has its own flavor which is enhanced by the spices you use to cook them. Beans can be used as a meal base when meat is present or if you are a vegetarian looking to create an easy dish without much fuss. Whether navy, lentil, Northern, or black, beans create some amazing slow cooker meals.**

**1. ? The average household has at least a few potatoes lurking around. They are a versatile food. Mash them, fry them, stew them, or throw them in the crock pot. Potatoes add density to soups, stews, and meals with meat. Because they, and other fibrous veggies like turnips and carrots, take longer to cook, they can be thrown in the cooker with the meat and allowed to cook all day.**

**1. ? Herbs can dramatically change the flavor of almost any meal. Herbs come dried, but release a better flavor if they are fresh. You can grow your own herbs in the house in small pots. All you need is a sunny spot, good soil, and water. Home grown herbs can be**

dried to extend their life, making them easy to keep around without worrying about wasting them. Herbs are added near the end of the crock pot cooking cycle so their flavor infiltrates the cooked meal.

1. ? Anything cooked in the slow cooker needs a liquid to start the process. Instead of always adding water, try broth. Chicken, beef, and vegetable broth are available in most grocery stores for very little money. Many varieties come already seasoned and it's a quick and easy way to add flavor to meat dishes.

1. ?Flour and cornstarch are used for thickening and sautéing. Applying a light coating of flour to meats and sautéing them in a little olive oil will create flavorful bits of essence that can be added to the slow cooker. At the end of a meal, adding cornstarch to the remaining liquid can create creamy gravy for dishes like rice or potatoes. Flour can also be used as a thickener, however cornstarch makes smoother gravies.

1. ? This article is about pantry staples, but since meat is the centerpiece of most crock pot meals, be sure to have some of your favorites on hand (in the freezer of course). It can be any meat you choose. A tougher cut of meat will cook better and almost melt in your mouth when the dish is ready. Slow cooking will add moisture and tenderize meat that would otherwise dry out and be tough when cooked in the oven.

With these ingredients on hand, you can create any number of basic meals in the slow cooker. By keeping them on hand, you'll have a variety of dinner ideas without the hassle of running to the store or searching for an answer when asked "What's for dinner?"

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