

Supermarket shelves stripped bare? History can teach us to 'make do' with food

April 16 2020, by Bethaney Turner



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Recent COVID-19 induced panic buying has raised concerns about food security for many Australians.

While there's [plenty of food available](#), many Australians have seen

supermarkets stripped bare of essentials in recent weeks. For some it can be hard to find basic items like rice or canned foods.

This is especially true for many of our most vulnerable citizens, from the elderly to those in [remote Indigenous communities](#). What's more, rising job losses and higher [food](#) prices means many people will be out-priced, [increasing](#) the number of those experiencing [food insecurity](#) in coming months.

But scarcity and food system vulnerabilities are not new experiences. Wars, the [great depression](#), the [global financial crisis](#) and [natural disasters](#) such as fires and floods have exposed the fallibilities of our food system.

In times of crisis and disaster "food preferences" are the first to go and "making do"—for those who can—becomes the name of the game.

And while right now there really is no reason to stock up on [food supplies](#) from supermarkets, the sight of empty shelves has led some Australians to look for alternative ways to feed themselves and their families. We can turn to past experiences to identify approaches, skills and resources.

In fact, doing so can help us prepare to respond to [future instability](#) in food access expected to be brought about through the impacts of climate change. Looking to the past can help build the knowledge and skills necessary to strengthen future household and community resilience.

Changing diets

Having enough food available doesn't mean everyone will have [equal access](#), nor does it mean all of us will be able to eat typical diets.

The United Nation's Food and Agricultural Organisation [defines](#) food security as requiring "physical and economic" access for "all people at all times." It not only requires access to "sufficient, safe and nutritious food," but also access to foods that meet our "dietary requirements and food preferences."

Recent low yields of drought-impacted crops such as rice means [supplies were limited](#) even prior to the shortages created by panic buying.

Canneries are [halting production](#) on some of their standard lines as they struggle to access ingredients to keep up with unprecedented demand.

And measures introduced to support [vulnerable groups](#) such as meal delivery and "[Basics Boxes](#)" are currently unable to cater to diverse tastes and needs.

It's likely, for those of us without special dietary needs, our everyday food habits will have to change.

Grow your own

Many Australians have turned to home food growing during COVID-19, with edible plants in nurseries quickly [selling out](#) of stock.

Growing your own is the most typical historical response to unstable food access. Limited supply during World War I led governments to [encourage](#) home and community food production. "[Dig for Victory](#)" campaigns were rolled out in the US and Canada, extending to the UK and Australia in World War II.

The benefits of having more localized food systems are also regularly revealed during extreme weather events.

Food access in Australia heavily relies on supply chains powered by trucks traveling vast distances. When roads are blocked—such as in the recent bushfires and the 2011 Queensland floods—[food access](#) is threatened unless you or your neighbors are growing your own.

Community gardens

Food gardening typically requires time, the willingness to be attentive to plant needs, as well as outside space with adequate sun. Not everyone has the infrastructure, knowledge or inclination to do this.

People can turn to [communal gardening](#) instead, such as The Happiness Garden in Canberra. Community gardens have historically been great ways of up-skilling and learning with others, but social distancing measures makes this challenging. It's also important to be wary of soil safety depending on previous uses of the land, particularly if you live in the inner city.

Still, there's a wealth of [information available](#) online, so connecting with local gardening groups, swapping socially distant tips within your suburb, or setting up [food-sharing points](#) with neighbors are great options for now.

Urban foraging

Food foraging and hunting of feral animals have supplemented mainstream food supplies during past economic instability. Weeds such as dandelions and feral rabbits were regular additions to meals during the Great Depression.

For urban dwellers, hunting for wild rabbits is probably not a realistic option, but [urban food foraging](#) has experienced a resurgence. Recent

rain means dandelions, purslane and nettles are rampant right now and, with the right preparation, they can be eaten in salads, soups and stir fries.

Expert [guidance](#) is also available online to help you avoid picking anything poisonous.

Start now to create good habits

Eliminating waste by being frugal and creative is key to making do in times of scarcity.

Knowing how best to [store and preserve](#) food (if you have limited fridge and freezer space consider bottling or [fermentation](#)); using whole foods ([why peel](#) carrots, potatoes and pumpkins?); and knowing substitution tricks (such as swapping eggs for [sago](#)), are important food skills in uncertain times.

This ability to adapt to uncertainty is critical to developing resilient communities.

As we look towards a future likely to be punctuated by more extreme weather events, environmental degradation and economic instability, we need robust national [food security](#) policy and local urban food systems planning that can meet the protracted challenges threatening our planetary health.

Right now is the perfect time for us to start experimenting with what we can do in our own homes and neighborhoods to help secure our food futures.

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