

# Frugal Family Activity: Snow Cake



The forecast is calling for heavy precipitation in the next few days, right in time for the new year. Most of us are still in vacation mode and parents with children are probably wondering how they'll entertain their children while school is still out. Unfortunately, the cold means there's no garden to tend to, and unless you've installed cold frames and planned for a winter harvest, there's nothing to pick from the ground. On fair days when the weather has calmed, and the sun is out, it's an ideal time for outdoor activities like tobogganing, hiking, skating. What happens when the snow falls fast and fills the streets and yards to the brim, though? Some stay holed up inside with a good book. Others play games or enjoy binge-watching Netflix. On days like those, there's no opportunity to dig in the dirt. But whether you're a parent wanting to entertain the kids or an adult looking for something different to do, there is one thing you can harvest after a winter storm. Snow!

My mother was, once upon a time, a preschool teacher. She still works with children and is a true kid-at-heart. I was recently reminded of an activity she used to do with her students and one that we would do at home. When the snow was fresh, we'd pop outside and find an undisturbed mound of the stuff and 'harvest' it for baking.

Yes. You heard that correctly. We'd bake a snow cake. The texture is dense, like a pound cake, and the taste was never really it's shining attribute. But the fact that we were baking with snow was the real spectacle. I asked my mother to share her recipe with me so I could share it with you today on this New Year's Eve. It's a fun recipe to try with kids, and it sure beats feeling bummed about the lack of warm gardening-ready weather.

### **Snow Cake**

- 1 cup of sugar
- 1/2 cup of butter (margarine can be substituted)
- 1/2 cup of milk
- 2 tsp baking powder
- 2 cups of flour
- 1 cup of snow\*\*

### **Directions**

- Preheat oven to 350F
- Mix all ingredients until batter is smooth
- Pour into a baking pan of your choice
- Bake for 30 to 40 minutes
- Remove from oven and let cool
- Add your favorite icing

*\*\*Make sure to scoop up fresh, clean snow.*

Please feel free to share photos of your snow cake or stories of making this recipe with your kids I'd love to see and hear them.

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# A Frugal Side Dish Recipe for the Holidays



I wanted to share a simple, easy, inexpensive side dish recipe with you just before the holidays. I'm always disappointed how little vegetables end up on the table this time of year. We give all the glory to the main dish, but what about the humble vegetables? I think they're a particularly important part of a holiday feast. They're tasty, filling, and provide plenty of vitamins and nutrients. Packing your table and plate with lots of veg is also the perfect way to avoid a food coma. It's not just about being healthy, though. Vegetable side dishes are easy to make and don't usually cost that much. Having trouble sourcing produce that isn't pricey? Choose frozen or canned

vegetables over fresh. Better yet, plan in advance and have frozen garden vegetables on hand in the freezer. You can delight your guests with fresh tasting produce grown right in your yard!

Peas are an easy vegetable to freeze, they go well with nearly any main protein (or a tofu loaf or nut roast if you're vegetarian or vegan), and they're relatively inexpensive and super easy to find in the grocery store frozen section should you not have any garden peas on hand. We used to eat canned peas often around the holidays, but now I always cook this dish. It's extremely simple but feels fancier than plain peas from a can.

## Braised Peas

*Serves 4*

### Ingredients

- Broth (chicken or vegetable) – enough to cover the peas
- 2 cups of peas (frozen)
- Half an onion (diced)
- 1 tbsp Butter or olive oil
- Salt and pepper to taste

### Directions

- Saute onions until translucent in a saucepan with butter or olive oil
- Add peas and broth to saucepan
- Simmer until peas are cooked through
- Add s&p to taste
- Use a slotted spoon to serve peas

Do you have any favorite vegetable side dishes that you serve when you're entertaining? I'm also fond of a good salad with a hearty meal and root vegetable mash.

**Wishing you a happy holiday season!**

Please let me know if there are any burning garden questions you'd like answered in the New Year. I'm so excited to start planning out the new gardening season, and I hope you are, too!

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## **Another Plant to Look Out for This Season: The Christmas Cactus**



Last week I talked a bit about poinsettias and why they're a great plant to grab around the holiday season. This week, I thought of another easy-to-source plant that pops up around

this time of year. The Christmas Cactus is a lovely tropical plant with succulent leaves and pretty flower buds that bloom right about now. Why do I recommend it? First, it's appearance. It's beautiful and exotic-looking. Next up? It's budget price tag! And for us frugal gardeners, that's the best part. During the holidays, you'll find these plants for cheap at your local nursery or supermarket. Be careful when shopping, though. Here are a few things to be on the lookout for when picking out a new plant-friend to bring home. These rules apply anytime you're buying plants, especially if they're discounted or not coming from a reputable nursery.

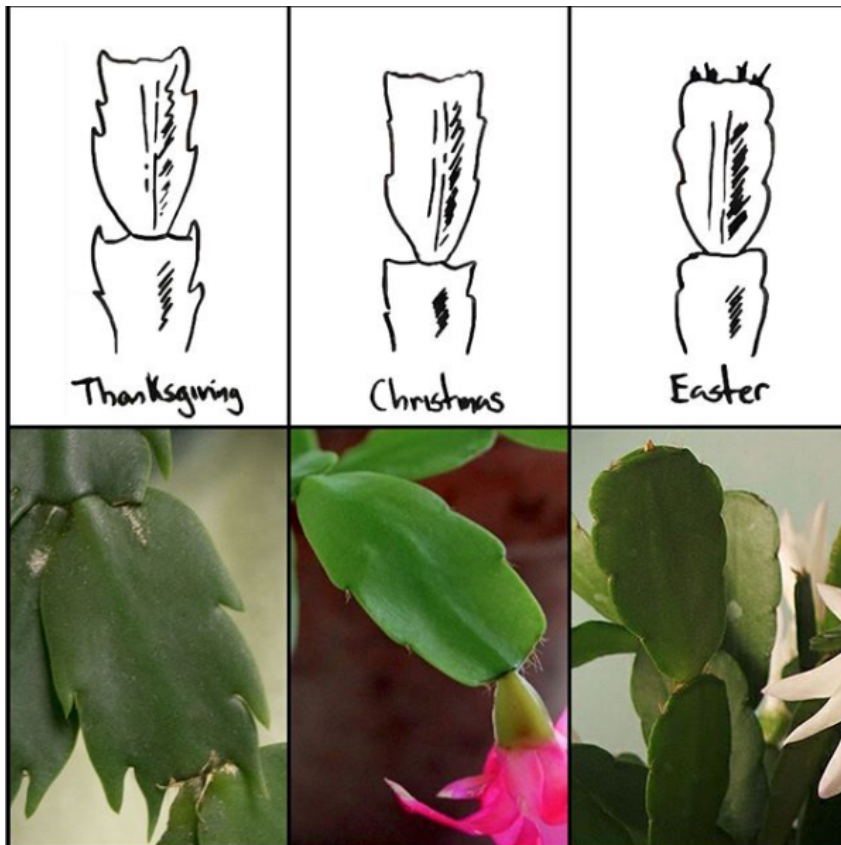
- **Scrutinize the leaves.** Don't purchase a plant that has browning leaves or foliage that looks unhealthy.
- **Look out for insects.** Little flies might hitch a ride to your home and infect other plants. If they're flying around the area, it might be wise to skip the purchase and seek your Christmas Cactus elsewhere.
- **Price.** Don't pay extra for fancy pots and don't let anyone rip you off. You should be able to find these for well under \$10.

Christmas Cactuses are easy to keep alive well past Christmas. A little humidity is helpful, which is why I house mine in my well-lit bathroom.

## Don't Be Fooled

Did you know that Christmas Cactuses are sometimes mislabelled? It's no surprise since different holiday cactuses look very similar. The Epic Gardener recently posted a handy guide to identifying your plant.





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structure of the different types of holiday cacti. Keep in mind you will still see different looking ones, because all holiday cacti are cultivars and hybrids from the relatively few species of *Schlumbergera* and *Rhipsalidopsis* found in nature.

- Thanksgiving Cactus (*Schlumbergera truncata*): Hooked, claw-looking edges. The most common one sold at nurseries and often mislabeled as Christmas Cactus.

- Christmas Cactus (*Schlumbergera bridgesii*): Smaller, smoother appearance and counter-intuitively one of the harder ones to find.

- Easter Cactus (*Rhipsalidopsis gaertnerii*): Smooth leaves with a bristly appearance to them.



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via: Instagram

I love buying plants. I bring them home regularly, and I often find myself sticking them in my cart when I'm at the supermarket doing groceries. If you're like me, though, and don't want your plant obsession to hurt your wallet, consider picking up plants during peak holiday moments. Around Christmas, Easter and even Valentine's Day you might be able to find plants heavily discounted or for a steal. That's not always the case, of course. Around Valentine's Day, bouquet prices skyrocket. For Mother's Day, flowers fetch high prices. But if you're not in a hurry and have a good eye, it's not hard to spot plant finds in the most unexpected of places.

# Don't Throw Out Your Poinsettia!



The holidays have arrived, and all I see everywhere are poinsettia plants. In fact, I've already been gifted one! It's a lovely plant that brightens up a room with a bit of cheer. I find it odd, though, that we only see these pretty plants around December. You blink, and they're gone. Every year, I seem to impress family and friends by the sheer fact that I keep my poinsettia plant alive longer than anyone else. No one I know keeps theirs past January 1st. I imagine garbage bins across town are filled with them. A graveyard of poinsettias. So, what's the trick? There isn't much of one. Just treat it like any other houseplant. Don't neglect it! I think that's the trouble. People perceive these plants as disposable and temporary, but they don't have to be. They're attractive plants and surprisingly cheap in-season. Wait a little and when all the holiday fuss has died down, and you might be able to snag one at a deep discount.



## A few tips

Still skeptical about whether you'll be able to keep your poinsettia alive? Here are some pointers for nurturing your plant.

- **Poinsettias love lots of sun.** Many folks probably don't put them in an ideal location because they're not thinking about long-term survival. Make sure to choose a sunny spot for your plant.
- **Water frequently, but allow the soil to dry between waterings.** This is actually something I do unintentionally, and it works wonders. Make sure there's somewhere for water to drain, though.
- **Keep it away from cold windows and drafts.** Cool temperatures are bad for this plant. Don't stick it right by a window and avoid placing it at your home's entrance.
- **Provide it with a humid environment.** The poinsettia is a tropical plant, so it prefers humidity over dry conditions. The easiest way to provide humidity is to bring it into the bathroom while showering. If your bathroom gets sun, you can even make it a permanent home for your plant.
- **Re-pot it.** Unless you purchase a poinsettia with a large planter, you'll need to re-pot it to keep it alive since many store-bought plants are crowded into small containers.

Not even sure why you'd want to keep one alive past the new year? Maybe red doesn't fit into your regular decor. Poinsettias are available in other color variations including pink and white. I'm particularly fond of the white variety. The plant will fit in seamlessly with the rest of your houseplants. With a little bit of patience and allowing for periods of total darkness, you may even successfully re-bloom your poinsettia just in time for December 2019.

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# What's a Frugal Gardener to do in the Snow ?



Where I live, the snow has arrived and is here to stay. It's been a month or so, now that we've begun to shovel our walkway and donned our boots when heading outdoors. A month where I was happy to take a break from thinking about gardening tasks: I think a break is necessary for any hobby. It allows you to refresh and come back to it newly excited. But what are you do when you're ready for the break to end?

Thirty days later and I'm itching to dig in the dirt, but the ground is frozen, and it's not about to melt anytime soon. Boredom can be either a blessing or a curse. Here's how I make the most of my gardening downtime.

## Take Advantage of the Rest Period

If you're in an area where winter signals the end of the season, here are some ways to keep entertained.

- **Find another hobby** – take up a new activity to spend your time when the temps drop below zero. Knitting, puzzling, reading, or browse your municipality's website to find free or low-cost gardening-related conferences to attend.
- **Scroll through Instagram** – Lucky gardeners in warmer climates are still enjoying lush, green crops. There's no shortage of inspiration and photo-entertainment on Instagram. You might even gather ideas for next year.
- **Clean** – You've heard of spring cleaning, but as a gardener, I often find myself tidying up more often in the winter so that I'm all organized when warmer weather arrives.
- **Learn something new** – Even the most seasoned gardeners can afford to educate themselves about new techniques or new plants they've never grown. Look for free online webinars or ask around to see if there are any in-person educational events in your town.
- **Gather and build** – With a bit of extra time on your hands, it's the perfect time to look around for supplies. Ask friends and family if they're throwing anything away that might be useful for your garden. Building supports and beds now will save you time in the spring.
- **Focus indoors** – Take stock of your indoor plants and make sure they're getting the attention they deserve. Consider starting an indoor garden for greens or herbs.
- **Enjoy the winter** – Stop lamenting about the end of the season! Embrace the colder weather and enjoy classic winter activities. Sledding, skating, building snowmen. Get outside, even if it's just for a walk. Get active, and you'll be primed to dig, haul, and plant in the new

year.

Whether you're still enjoying warm weather somewhere south or you're already buried in snow, think about planning your downtime from the garden. The winter doesn't have to be gloomy. Take stock of all the possibilities and use the rest period wisely. You'll come back to next year's garden fully re-charged.

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## **Don't Throw Out Those Seed Catalogs!**





The seed catalogs are arriving! It's like an early Christmas this time of year when I visit the mailbox and find a new catalog waiting for me. I am signed up to receive a bundle of them from various retailers. Even when I have plenty of seeds on hand for the next season, I love to flip through the brightly colored pages and read about different kinds of veggies, herbs, and flowers. When I'm done, though, I don't ever toss them in the recycling bin. I keep seed catalogs on hand for a few years, because I believe they are a fantastic resource and reference material.

**Why I Keep Back Catalogs**



I have a magazine folio filled with old seed catalogs. I usually keep them for around four years or so, until the folio gets full and it's time to purge. What's the point of keeping these? Here are a few reasons why.

- **Resource material** – Most seed catalogs aren't just designed to sell a product. They're painstakingly created – at least my favorite ones are – and contains tons of extra information that's incredibly valuable. Seed starting charts, growing guides, gardening tips, and more.
- **Seed info** – Sometimes, I need to go back and find information about a particular variety I planted that I no longer have the seed packet for. Is your seed packet gone or damaged and you can't read the planting info? Check the seed catalog!
- **Notebook** – Scrawl notes and stick post-its in the catalogs you receive. Instead of buying a new notebook, use seed catalogs to write down your observations, circle the plants you want to grow for the next year or year after.
- **Reading material** – Sometimes, when I'm bored without my garden in the winter, I'll flip through my collection of seed catalogs.
- **Inspiration** – When I lack garden mojo, I'll check out my collection of catalogs to get inspired again.

Of course, seed catalogs are useful if you're planning to order some seeds for next year. Nothing beats flipping through the pages and excitedly making plans and dreaming big. Check out your favorite seed retailer's website to sign up for their seed catalog. Most companies will mail them to you for free. Even if you don't plan to order anything this year, they're really great to have on hand.

Some seed retailers also create separate gardening guides that include product listings but are packed with even more growing information for gardeners. Often they're also available for

free or for a nominal fee.

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## Properly Storing Seeds



At the end of the season, my seed packets are typically all in a jumble. In the spring, I start things off with the intention of being ultra-organized, but as the season progresses, I don't always have a spare moment to store everything correctly. I'm constantly needing to access seeds during the growing season as I succession sow and start seedlings to replace spent plants. Things, no doubt, get a bit messy, and conditions aren't always ideal.

Now that winter is basically here, it's time to sort and organize seeds in anticipation for the arrival of seed catalogs. It's also time to think about storing seeds for the

long cold season ahead. It's a must for a frugal gardener. ed storage

## **Organizing**

First, I sort through my current seed stocks to see what I have on hand. Is there anything that's past it's prime? Any empty containers or seed packets? I take note of those when the time comes to put in seed orders.

I like to keep all the information about my seeds in a Google Sheet. I can easily edit and make notes not only about whether I'm running low on a particular seed type but also about the time it takes for seeds to germinate and whether I've had luck with certain plants during the previous year.

I also take the time to consider what I plan to do with my garden in the new year. I keep the seeds I'm eager to plant within easy reach.

## **Storing**

There are so many options for storing seeds. I used to use little laboratory jars I purchased for cheap on eBay to sort my seed supplies. The process was tedious, but it was very neat and organized. Everything was locked up in airtight containers, and everything remained very fresh. I still have some seeds in these containers, but I've gone back to keeping them in their packets for easy reference to planting and maturity info. It's also less time-consuming. Prolonging freshness requires:

- A dry location (airtight if possible)
- A dark spot out of direct sunlight
- A cool ambient temperature

Storing your seeds with care will ensure you can use them past the packet 'expiry' date. Proper seed storage will save you money in the long run, so you're not having to re-purchase the

same seeds each year just because they've gone stale.

Come back next week for a post about seed ordering and how to tackle those incoming catalogs.

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## Don't Throw Those Pots Away!



The pre-winter cleanup continues. I got a jump on tidying things up in the garden when the weather forecast began calling for below zero temps, but there are still things to organize as the threat of a snowstorm looms nearer.

It's now time to clean up lingering potted plants that were happy with the cooler fall weather. Some were gifted to me, others I left on the porch because I knew they'd survive the lower temperatures. A non-frugal gardener might just toss those dead plants in the compost and recycle the pots. But if



you're frugal minded, you'll see tons of potential for those containers.

## Why Keep Them?

I keep those pots around for a few reasons, even if they're a little dirty or the wrong size for my current needs.

- **For planting next year.** I use them as containers for herbs or for plants when I've run out of room in my main garden beds.
- **For seed starting.** If I have lots of small pots laying around, even the flimsy kind, I don't toss them. I hoard them, actually. Starting plants indoors requires multiple stages of transplanting, and I like to have a variety of pot sizes on hand to ensure none of my seedlings become root bound.
- **For transporting supplies.** I always like to have a few medium sized pots on hand – preferably sturdy ones – to lug around dirt or other gardening supplies. Without the budget for fancy buckets and pails, I rely on cheap repurposed containers.
- **For indoor potting.** Have multiple containers on hand is useful for when you bring home indoor houseplants that might be stuck in too-tiny pots.

You also never know when any current pots are going to fail you. Even good-quality sturdy pots crack, break, or get knocked over by sneaky squirrels. In a pinch, an old recycle plant pot will house your homeless plants should such a situation arise.

## Sanitize Them First

Before re-using containers, be sure to wash them to prevent spreading disease or pests. Think they look clean? Don't risk it. It's no fun to lose all your seedlings at once.



There are two ways you can sanitize pots so you can use them for other purposes.

**Dishwasher** – This is my preferred method because it's efficient and I'm sometimes lazy. The heat alone will help kill pathogens and bacteria, but you can pop in some dishwasher detergent for extra cleaning power. Use the top rack for delicate pots. I use this method to clean my seedling trays each year, too.

**Bleach Bathtub** – Add a tiny bit of bleach (a capful should do the trick) to a tub full of hot water and let your pots soak for a little while. Scrub them off if need be. Dry them and return them to your potting station.

There's no reason to trash perfectly good pots. Whether they're made of plastic, ceramic, or stone, it's always useful to have extra containers on hand. Save cash and keep your gardening eco-friendly by saving containers from the trash bin.

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## **Why Prepping in Advance is so Important for the Frugal Gardener**



I spent a significant chunk of my Friday afternoon cleaning out the furnace room in my home. In the past, it's doubled as my grow room, the place where I start seedlings and pot up plants when the weather is less than ideal outside. In the past year or so, it's also seemingly become our junk room and triage area. It had become so filled with stuff that I was having a hard time imagining how I would ever be productive in the space again. I quickly went to work taking out bins and labeling them so I could organize the space accordingly. The finished area is now free of clutter and ready for seed starting.

### **Why Bother?**

As a gardener on a budget, I find it incredibly important to carefully plan and think of all garden-related things in advance. The better I plan, the less likely it is that I'll make uninformed impulse purchases down the road. Prepping and thinking about the 2019 gardening season now means that I can adequately budget and think of penny-pinching solutions to any problems I run into. Frugal gardening isn't difficult, but it

requires a bit more foresight.

## **What to Think About Now?**

It's early to think about planting locations and seeding schedules, but there's still plenty of thinking to be done before the new year rolls around. Here are some things I tend to have on my mind right about now:

- **Seed inventory** – Is there anything I need to think about replenishing? Can I swap seeds with a fellow gardener to save money? Is this a variety that did well in the recent growing season?
- **Seed starting supplies** – Can I repurpose anything from last year? Are there products that were not worth the price tag? Do I know anyone with a surplus of pots and trays that might want to make a trade? Are there any sales online for this stuff?
- **Seed starting setup** – Having my setup ready in advance means that there won't be any delays. Starting too late or not having everything prepped may end in missed planting dates. When the seed starting process is disorganized, you might find yourself more likely to spend extra money on starts in the spring. And boy does it add up!

**Plan ahead.** It's worth it. Trust me. You can make more intelligent purchases and avoid small buys that might cost an arm and a leg in shipping. You'll be more likely to take time to look for deals instead of rushing to get your supplies at the last minute. Procrastination only causes stress, so avoid it like the plague!

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# Don't Let Your Halloween Pumpkin Go To Waste



Are you ready for Halloween? Surely you've already procured your pumpkin. Have you carved a scary Jack-o-Lantern yet? I hate carving, so my husband is the one who does it. He's extraordinarily artistic and always manages to etch out something incredible. We normally buy a few pumpkins for our front porch. Some we carve, others we let be. My personal favorite part of the pumpkin tradition is getting to eat them! But there are plenty of ways to prevent those round orange globes from going to waste.

## Ideas for your pumpkins

Here are a few ideas for using your Halloween pumpkin:

- **Roast those yummy seeds.** Once I start eating pumpkin seeds, I can't stop. They're so delicious and [easy to make](#). Just keep an eye on them while they're baking to

prevent burning.

- **Use the flesh.** Set aside pumpkin flesh when carving to use in cooking. Freeze or use it right away to add pumpkin-flavor to your dishes.
- **Stick it in the compost.** I'd suggest hacking it into bite-sized pieces so it can compost quicker.
- **Save the seeds for next year.**

## A few recipe ideas

[Pumpkin soup](#) is one of my all-time favorite soups, and it's a very easy recipe to make in the slow cooker. Make sure to pick a smaller pumpkin, since large varieties don't have particularly tasty flesh.

[Pumpkin pie](#) is equally delicious, but I don't usually get around to making it since Canadian Thanksgiving happens before Halloween.

Risotto is often labeled as a difficult dish to master, but I find it's an easy weeknight dinner. [Add pumpkin](#) puree for a luxurious twist on your regular risotto.

Make [pumpkin butter](#), another slow-cooker friendly option that's simple to whip up and makes a great host or hostess gift.

## Happy Halloween

Whatever you decide to do with your pumpkin decorations or Jack-o-lanterns, be sure to bring them in overnight to prevent squirrels from gnawing at them. The frugal gardener knows that using a pumpkin to the fullest is eco-friendly and budget-friendly. Remember, though, you can't eat a pumpkin once it has been carved. So save the flesh while cutting and be sure to scoop out all the seeds before setting it outside on your spooky porch or front stoop.