



# Extension News Column

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Here we are the week of Christmas. In a weak moment, or a moment of supreme overconfidence, you agreed to host the Christmas meal. Not that you don't know how to prepare the meal, but after the presents were bought, you are just a little thin in the wallet area. It's easy to get carried away when it comes to the holiday meal. But as we always talk about here in the pinching pennies column, there are always bargains to be had.

The first step in planning the holiday meal is to figure out how much money you can spend, then stay within that budget. People want to eat well, but you are probably more worried about the menu than your guests are. Remember that the most important part of the holidays is spending time with friends and family. Breaking the budget or exhausting yourself does no one any good.

The major part of the meal is the meat. If you are looking for a bargain, choose a turkey. You can buy a 20 lb turkey for \$12. Some stores even offer a free turkey when you buy a certain amount of groceries. If you are challenged in the culinary arts department, pick up a fully cooked turkey or a ham. These are fully cooked products that only need to be heated and served. Last week I saw a 10 lb. fully cooked turkey for \$20 and a ham for \$22. You may choose to serve a standing rib roast or leg of lamb which may set you back a little bit more money, but watch for sales to trim that expense.

Most of us try to prepare too many side dishes for holiday meals. Keep it simple and not only will your schedule get easier, but you will trim the bill. Think about serving two vegetables and a starch. Canned vegetables can be a bit less expensive, but for a special meal, think about using frozen or fresh vegetables. Watch what is on special at the store and make your plans based on the Wednesday circular. Serve a fresh salad as the first course, and your main course is planned.

Now for the dessert. Again, it is too easy to over do. I'm guilty of making cakes and pies and some times even a cobbler. Keep it simple. Keep your eyes open for the possibilities. I know I can make excellent pies from scratch, but sometimes you can buy a baked pie for less than the individual ingredients would cost you. So unless you are doing Grandma's recipe, you may want to choose to buy the pie. This also can save you a ton of time.

Think about easy desserts. Consider baked apples. Just core the apples, fill the core with raisins and brown sugar, bake or microwave. Done in a heartbeat and far easier than a pie.

I've been doing cobblers and crisps instead of pies for years. My family loves the fruit part, but aren't hung up on the crusts. How about brownies made from a box, ice cream, and chocolate syrup? Make a pumpkin dip with pumpkin, cream cheese, powdered sugar to taste, and pumpkin pie spice. Serve with sliced apples or gingersnaps.

Also, who says you have to do the whole meal? Ask each of your guests to bring one part of the meal and you furnish the meat. You've "shared the fun" and cut your work and costs way down.

The holidays are a time to enjoy loved ones. Keep things simple and you can enjoy your guests without breaking the bank.