



The Prepared Home

Making the most of scarce fuel when cooking by using a hay box

It does not matter whether you use electricity, gas or solid fuel to cook, there can be times when fuel is scarce. At the beginning of the 20th century there was a fashion for something called fuel-less cookery. That sounds as though it would save some of that precious fuel.

Fuel-less cookery is an adaptation of a technique used by campers and others spending time outdoors called hay box cookery. Ideas for using this technique can be found in old cookery books which people might have used to help them prepare a meal to eat while on a journey or out for the day. Today, mention can be found of it on camping web sites and on sites which discuss ideas to help people make the best use of resources.

This sort of cooking is particularly suitable for stews and casseroles, although it can be used to cook soups (and the stock that is used as a base for them), rice, beetroots, and porridge. Less water is needed than for other forms of cooking as there is less evaporation.

Using a hay box

This is an old technique that can use literally what it says, some hay and a box. The idea is that a container of food is heated up to boiling point and then immediately placed in a box surrounded by hay as insulation.

The idea is to take a box with a tightly fitting lid and fill it with insulating material like hay. The dish needs to have a closely fitting lid and may have a clean towel wrapped around it to protect it from any possible contamination. Make a nest in the hay for the dish and make sure that there is enough hay left to put over the top. If you intend doing this a few times you can get some fabric to make a bag, fill it with hay and then sew the opening to make a cushion that can be put over the top.

The food needs to be heated thoroughly to start with, which is where the idea of boiling it for 10 minutes first comes from. Once it is hot, the wrapped sealed dish is put in the box and left alone until it cooks. This leads to quite a saving in the amount of fuel used. It also means that like with a standard slow cooker, it is possible to start the cooking process for a meal a few hours before it is needed and get on with other things while it is cooking.

It can take four times as long to cook food in a hay box than it would in the oven. Some people leave things overnight and then warm them up again whereas others say that it should not be left for more than 4 hours so that the food does not cool too much to make it into a health hazard. The "safety police" say that the food should be kept above 140 F. How quickly the food cools also depends on the temperature outside the box so it is useful to leave it in a fairly warm place.

In practice, how long you leave it depends on the sort of food you are cooking. It is best to treat something like rice, which can develop toxins that are not destroyed when reheated while it is being kept warm, with great care. Most other foods can be made safe again by reheating.

It is important that whatever is used, not to check the food very often if at all, as this will only lead to the food cooling down so that it will not cook properly. Most of the foods that can be cooked this way don't go past their best very quickly so checking them is not really necessary. In fact, many of them improve with longer cooking.

Foods cook better if the dish is nearly full. However, it is important not to get the insulating material wet from either the steam (hence the well fitting lid) or from spilling the food, so don't overfill the dish. If hay and some other insulating materials get wet, they do not hold the heat in as well. Hay does not last well if it gets damp. A hay box left unattended for a while can look to a mouse just like a ready-made home, so be careful where you keep it.

Some people use the traditional wooden box, possibly a tea chest, others a more modern Styrofoam box, but whatever is used it needs to be able to hold in the heat and keep out drafts. The insulating material could be crumpled newspaper, wood shavings, Styrofoam peanuts, fur, wool, synthetic blankets or anything that holds in the heat. The trick is to create lots of little air pockets. The insulating material can be used again and again, although you may need to add a little more hay as time passes. It is also essential to dry out any damp insulation so that the box works well next time. If the hay box is not used for a while, make sure that the hay in it is dry because wet hay, left a long time, can catch fire.

Now you know what you need, you can go around and scrounge some of the necessary materials. With care and common sense this kind of cooker can be made of re-cycled materials that you have lying around. Why not have a go now before fuel gets scarce as part of your efforts to reduce your energy bills, that way yours will be The Prepared Home.