Transforming your dorm into a kitchen

Cooking as a college student can be very challenging — not only is it hard to find the time, energy and financial means to consistently cook nutritious and tasty meals. Many Tech students must share a communal kitchen with limited space for storing ingredients and supplies. While dining halls offer a nice alternative, navigating the selection with dietary restrictions or nutritional concerns can make them less attractive alternatives. Instead, here are some tips to make cooking for yourself in your dorm room easy, while not breaking the bank.

GATHER YOUR SUPPLIES

Start by collecting the essentials for cooking. Having a mini-fridge and microwave in your dorm room can be imperative, allowing you to store more perishable goods, boil water and prepare more meals. If you plan on using a communal kitchen, make sure you bring a food tray to hold your ingredients, dishes and utensils. This makes it much easier to carry everything you need to the kitchen, as well as bring dirty dishes to a sink. One or two sets of utensils, a measuring cup, bowl, plate, pot, pan and spatula are all good starting points and can be used to make practically every dish. For clean-up, bring dish soap and a few towels. Bring a Tupperware container to store leftovers so you can save food for later. Also, check all your supplies are microwave safe and can withstand some wear and tear.

RELAY ON THE BASICS

Having a few solid essentials that you can rely on can ease some of the stress of deciding what to cook. For breakfasts, some ideas include oatmeal, instant grits, granola or other cereals, frozen or dried fruits and nuts. For lunch or dinners, pasta, frozen vegetables and fresh vegetables with a longer shelf-life, like sweet potatoes or carrots, are all easy options. To make sure your meals have some protein, tuna or salmon packets and canned beans are great choices. For a quick meal, couscous is ready in a matter of minutes. Having a back-up frozen meal, such as a veggie burger, is also a great choice.

For perishables, make sure you have fresh vegetables to last a week or two. Also, keep some basic seasonings such as salt and pepper, mustard, ketchup, or chili powder, which can spruce up any meal.

SHOP WISELY

Ideally, try to purchase all of your non-perishable goods before or during moving in to campus to reduce the amount of food you must buy later. That way, if you want to shop at stores around campus (such as Pablix), you can just purchase perishables. If you don’t have access to a car, make sure to bring reusable grocery bags that you can comfortably walk to and from a store with. Plan in advance exactly what you need to purchase to save yourself time and money and refrain from buying anything you won’t end up needing.

GET CREATIVE

If you have a dining plan, grab a piece of fruit from the dining hall to eat as a snack later in the day. There is almost always free or discounted food available for college students. Load up on food where you can find. Try finding new inspiration online for dishes you could make.

College plant mom’s guide to raising flora

So you just checked housing guidelines and apparently you can’t bring your favorite pet to school with you. That sucks, but you can instead invest in some lovely green treasures to keep you company during the long hours of studying in your hall. Plant care can be tricky. Typically, a small room with bright sunlight can get pretty cramped, as most plants don’t like too much direct light. Keeping them watered is another issue, especially when there isn’t a readily accessible sink nearby. But fear not — there are plenty of dorm-friendly plants that can brighten up your living space.

CONSIDER YOUR OPTIONS

It’s important to research your new plant friend before placing it in your dorm. Plants that need lots of light can sit happily on your windowsill, but others may start to wilt and yellow with too much sun exposure. Plants, such as bamboo, aloe and cactus are sturdy and easy to maintain. A succulent will be very content to bask in the sun. A bamboo or flower should sit a little further away from those direct rays of light.

WATER’S NEEDED

Next, research how much and how often to water them. Some plants like to keep their soil moist all the time. Others don’t mind having a dry pot. It’s easy to make assumptions, but this may damage your plant in the long run. Even within the same family, different species of plant have different needs. A potted cactus needs dry, gritty soil, while a Christmas cactus needs a little more water. It helps to have a designated cup to water your plants. Every time your plant needs water, the same cup. A Christmas cactus should only be watered once a week once the weather warms up. It’s okay to approximate how much water to give, but be very careful to avoid overwatering. Some plants, like flowers, are harder to maintain. Even everyone’s favorite plant friend, the adorable succulent, has a hard time in dorm rooms. It’s important to consider your plant experience and skill. Those with green thumbs should take on the challenge while those who have a tendency to kill every green thing they touch should stick to cactus and bamboo.

POSITION WISELY

Another helpful piece of advice is to make sure your plant is secure. If you’re having friends over, one misplaced elbow could lead to the death of your dearest leafy friend. The space on top of your wardrobe is hard to reach and will keep your plant buddies out of harm’s way. If your desk is out of direct sunlight, it is a perfect spot for some of your plant friends to watch you work without getting sunburnt. If not, try placing your plants on top of your wardrobe or air conditioning unit.

ENJOY THE PROCESS

The most important thing is to take joy in caring for your plants — like any pet — there are responsibilities, but you should be having fun. It is always exciting to name your plants and grow an attachment to them. They may be inanimate objects, but they are still living things. Whether your mission is to become the plant mom of your hall or simply to have one or two study buddies around, knowing your space and your plants is helpful in having happy, healthy greenery in your dorm room.
Make your dorm room feel like home

Walking into a closet-sized dorm room on move-in day can be intimidating. The barren walls and unfamiliar furniture are not the most welcoming of sights. But these tiny spaces can become your safe haven during the school year. A plan and the right mindset are all you need to turn your walk-in closet into a home.

Start with the basics. What are you bringing from home? 20 pairs of shoes that you need to figure out how to store? A backpack that you can’t live without? Make a list. Figure out where you’re going to store everything you are bringing, so you are not frantically shoving clothes into drawers when you move in.

If you have any decorations already, use them! That cute lamp you saw in Target is nice, but it also costs $50. Use what you have and do not be afraid to customize your old items to give them a fresh adult look.

Do-it-yourself projects are also a fun way to bring an affordable touch to your dorm. A roll of string and some clothespins combined with your favorite photos of your friends from home can fill an entire wall with cute memories.

Once you have everything you already mapped out, figure out what you still need to buy. Go into the store with a plan. IKEA and Walmart are smart places to shop if you’re trying to save a little money. Start with only things you absolutely need. New sheets and towels? A shower caddy? Put them in your cart. A mug or poster? Maybe hold off for a bit. Remember that you’re short on space.

Once the hard parts are finished, getting into the actual decorating is the most fun part about planning out your dorm. Figure out what dorm you’ll be living in and how it’s set up. (Hint: they are all pretty much the same.)

What height do you want to loft your bed at? If you are bringing bigger items, such as a microwave, mini-fridge, a ton of extra storage containers, it is important to know where they are going. Typically, the space under a lofted bed is a helpful storage place. Knowing which decoration is going on which wall or surface can also be helpful, but that’s also something you can figure out once you get there.

Knowing a general theme is extremely helpful. Whether that theme is a generic concept (i.e. space or butterflies), your favorite pop culture piece or just a set of colors you really enjoy, it’s nice to have a general idea of what you want to see in your dorm. You don’t have to follow this theme strictly, it’s just a set of ideas to help you get started. For decorations, once you know exactly what you want it’s okay to splurge a little. Shopping from small artists on Etsy or in a local art store is a fun way to make your dorm unique.

Some personal favorites are cork boards, tapestries and funky pillowcases that match your comforter. Many rooms have lights – either string lights or colorful LEDs – and this is an awesome way to add some excitement to your dorm, especially for when your eyes are tired of the fluorescent overhead lighting. If you have a favorite blanket or stuffed animal, don’t be afraid to bring them along. It’s okay to have a keepsake from your youth, even after you start living on your own. Other fun trinkets, such as books and framed photographs, are great touches for your desk or windowsill.

There’s no one way to make your dorm feel like home, every student is different in what comforts or excites them in a living space. A crucial tip is to decorate in a way that will make you happiest, even if that means your room does not look exactly like the one down the hall. It’s your dorm and you are the one who has to live there.