

Spending two hundred bucks these days is easy; making back your investment is a lot harder. Yet with the advice of several value-minded experts, we found seven surprisingly simple ways to stretch out that \$200 with immediate savings or over time.

Light up your life

Use LED (light-emitting diode) bulbs. Prices have dropped dramatically, with many selling for \$10 (or as low as \$5 with some utility rebate programs). An Energy Star-certified LED bulb uses 70 to 90 percent less energy than an incandescent bulb and lasts up to 25 times longer. Replace 20 bulbs in your home, and with an average of three hours of use per day, you should recoup that \$200 in a year and a half, even quicker in some states with higher electricity costs, says Brittney Gordon of the Environmental Protection Agency's Energy Star program: "Think of it this way: If you put an LED in a baby's nursery today, it could still be working by the time the child went to college."

Pack smart

With airlines charging extra for everything except using the lavatory, travelers need to pack smart to avoid checked-bag fees. Look for a 20- to 21-inch (sometimes called international size), wheeled carry-on that is lightweight and expandable for extra capacity. One that meets your needs should cost \$175 or less. Invest about \$25 in packing cubes, which both organize and compress



your clothing and gear, says Peter Cobb, cofounder and executive vice president of eBags.com. Many airlines charge at least \$25 one way for the first checked bag. "By carrying your suitcase onto the plane, you not only don't have to worry about its being lost—it pays for itself after four round-trip flights," says Cobb.

Shop your backyard

To eat more expensive food without blowing your budget, landscape your backyard with edibles. Frugal-living expert Erin Huffstetler says if you can dig a hole, you can successfully cultivate fruit and nut trees or bushes. Her blueprint: Grow two of each of the following—raspberry plants (\$18 for the pair), blueberry plants (\$35), red-seedless-grape plants (\$25), cherry bushes (\$68) and 3-foot almond trees (\$46)—plus 25 ever-bearing strawberry plants (\$11.50). At maturity a cherry bush yields 20 to 30 pounds of fruit; an almond tree, 12 to 15 pounds of nuts. Within three to five years you'll have your own produce section. There are varieties to suit almost any climate. "Many fruits and nuts are incredibly easy to grow," says Huffstetler. "When you consider that a pint of strawberries sells for \$1.70 on average, and each plant yields 1 to 2 pints in its first year, we're talking serious savings."

Seal it and save

Americans throw away more than \$300 worth of food each year. Buying groceries in larger quantities or on sale in season can stretch your food dollar. But if you can't eat 20 pounds of asparagus or fresh salmon in a week, or use 25 pounds of flour before it goes stale, extend its shelf life three to five times by using a vacuum food sealer, says

MONEY REPORT

The Best Ways to Spend \$200

How to get more from those Benjamins

By LAURA DAILY



MoneySaver

Carole Cancler, author of *The Home Preserving Bible*. A basic model runs about \$80, with a year's supply of bags costing another \$50. Get a \$10 jar-sealer accessory to help you store fragile foods such as potato chips or crackers in jars. That leaves you \$60 to stock up on the best food at the best price and can save you \$200 a year. Once sealed, the food can last weeks—sometimes months—longer in the refrigerator or freezer.

Clip for savings

You don't need to be an extreme couponer to reap extreme savings. Some 91 percent of coupons are still distributed through Sunday newspapers. To get more coupons, buy an extra Sunday newspaper or two for the inserts, says Stephanie



Nelson of CouponMom.com. If it's a great week, buy four. And here are some cheaper places to buy them: a gas station, a big-box store, super-market or dollar store (where a \$2 paper may sell for \$1). Even modest use of coupons, especially when matched with an item on sale, can save a two-person household \$30

per week. That's an easy way to get back an investment of \$200 in two months. "Coupons are free money," says Nelson. "If you throw away those for items you use, you're crazy not to look at them."

Membership pays

Buy a membership to your favorite zoo, aquarium and/or art, science or history museum. If you live in a city with lower admission fees for memberships, purchase several. Drop in whenever you wish for as long (or short) as you want. With some entry fees as high as \$25 (the San Diego Zoo's is \$46), it may take only a couple of visits to find yourself ahead, says Janet Vaughan of the American Alliance of Museums. Membership usually gets you in the door without paying a dime, (CONTINUED ON PAGE 33)



RON BURLEY
ON YOUR SIDE

READER COMPLAINT:

Repair firm leaves owner with cranky furnace

• **In the summer** of 2011, AARP member Christine Klinger of Reynoldsville, Pennsylvania, wanted to make sure her family's furnace would be ready for winter. That touched off a two-year struggle to stay warm.

The trouble started with

the initial service call. Joe Manners from Jack's Heating told Christine and her husband, Clifford, that their 20-year-old furnace needed to be replaced, so the couple pulled \$2,880 from savings to install a new Rheem system that Manners recommended—and it never worked properly. Over the next year, at least four of Manners' attempted fixes failed to solve the problems.

Another repair firm said it would take \$300 to fix the unit but cautioned that it was oversized for the house, meaning it would operate inefficiently and be prone to failure. The best solution, the other firm said, would be to tear out the unit and install another one. That was money the Klingers, who are now

retired, felt they shouldn't have to pay.

After two years of chilly winters and out of options, Christine reached out to On Your Side, and we reached out to Manners. While he agreed that the furnace didn't work right, he disagreed with the need to replace it. We confirmed the diagnosis with an experienced Rheem installer that a new furnace was the only real remedy.

We placed a call to the manufacturer, Rheem Manufacturing Co., the giant heating and cooling company based in Atlanta. The Klingers' problems weren't Rheem's fault, but after our prodding, the company contacted the Klingers and offered to replace the unit and cover all installation costs—one of

the finest examples of corporate compassion we've encountered.

You can avoid such surprises by following these steps when it comes to a major home repair.

> **Separate the adviser from the provider.** Have problems diagnosed by an independent expert, then get several bids.

> **Check documents.** Ask to see bonding certificates and insurance papers. Confirm the company's record with national associations.

> **Get references.** Talk to other homeowners who have used the company. Don't just ask for references; make sure you actually call them. A little bad news is OK, just as long as things worked out in the end. ■

and there may also be discounts at the facility's shop, restaurant and special exhibits. An added bonus is that many museums and zoos have reciprocal arrangements with their counterparts nationwide. Showing your membership card at a sister site could get you a free or discounted entry. And remember that admission to almost every major museum in Washington, D.C., is free, courtesy of your tax dollars.

Map it out

Give scavenger Mike Wolfe of the History Channel TV series *American Pickers* \$200 and he'll forage flea markets and garage sales for road maps instead of classic fare such as Fiesta dinnerware or Bakelite jewelry. Why? Nostalgia for a pre-GPS time, when gas stations were full-service and road maps were practically works of art, has fueled collector groups like the Road Map Collectors Association (roadmaps.org). "The beauty of road maps is that there are so many



AARP helps you and your family save real money.

different types of collectors—some collect by auto club or state; others, by cover art or their birth year," says Wolfe. The maps are readily available, and many remain in good shape, having been stuck away in drawers and shoe boxes. While road maps from the 1950s and '60s may net you only a few bucks, those published by auto clubs and oil and gas companies in the '20s, '30s and '40s can fetch a pretty penny; some, \$150 or more if you sell them online to collectors or an antiques dealer. One tip: Ask at estate sales to peek inside the family car. Vintage road maps are often forgotten in the glove compartment. ■



JEAN CHATZKY
BACK TO BASICS

Headed Back to School?

There's plenty of financial help out there if you know where to look

• **It's one of the questions** I get asked most often: Do you save for your children to attend college or for your retirement? The answer is the latter—because there's plenty of financial aid for college but no financial aid for retirement.

But what if it's you who wants to go to school? The number of graduate and postgraduate students ages 50 to 64 has been climbing steadily, from 625,000 in 2007 to as many as 750,000 in 2011—a 20 percent increase, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Adults "assume because they're not a 17-year-old or they're working, they won't qualify for aid," says Mark Kantrowitz, senior vice president and publisher of Edvisors.com.

Here's how to make the most of your options.

Fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

Submit this just as you did when your children were in school. It's best to try to exhaust your opportunities for federal aid before turning to the more expensive private market. The most common types of federal aid—Stafford and Plus loans—are available to you. Pell and Supplemental Education Opportunity grants are restricted to students without bachelor's degrees; and if you're going to school as an undergrad, you're not eligible for a Parent Plus loan.

Take it seriously.

For most types of federal financial aid, you need to be enrolled at least half time in a degree or academic

program. "You can't just go back and enroll in continuing education or take one class at a time," says Karen McCarthy, senior policy analyst with the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators.

Seek a tax break.

You may be eligible for an annual \$2,500 American Opportunity Tax Credit. Another break, the Lifetime Learning Tax Credit, is worth up to \$2,000 per year, but you can't take it in the same year you take the American Opportunity credit. Taxpayers under a certain income level can deduct student-loan interest. Bonus: You don't have to itemize.

Open a 529 account.

If one or more 529 savings accounts has money that your children didn't need, change the beneficiary to yourself. If you know in advance that you're heading back to school, open a 529 for yourself. That may get you a state tax deduction as well as the chance to earn some tax-free growth. (For more on 529s, see page TK.)

Get a scholarship.

Some scholarships are specifically aimed at older students. Try Fastweb.com and StudentScholarshipSearch.com to find them. You'll be prompted to enter a birth date to find the ones that are age appropriate.

—With additional reporting by Arielle O'Shea



WANT MORE ADVICE?

Read previous columns at aarp.org/jeanchatzky.

Tablet extra content

Material must be written, edited, researched, copyedited, and approved along with print content.

Helping Others With Your Savings

- Whether your \$200 investment made you a windfall or left you with pocket change, you have some extra spending money. Why not dole out the dollars to charity? These are a few ways to make it happen.

1. Use websites such as BrightFunds.org or NetworkForGood.org to distribute your donations to charities, even your specific favorites. Not only do these sites manage all your charitable giving in one spot; they also help you find nonprofits that can maximize your donation and provide a comprehensive report at the end of the year for tax purposes. Visit the AARP Foundation website (AARP.org/AARP-Foundation) to learn more about volunteering opportunities and the Drive to End Hunger.

2. Use those extra coupon inserts that you don't need—especially the ones that offer items for free or nearly free—to buy the goods and donate them to a food pantry or shelter. Even expired coupons can be used by military families overseas, though not on U.S. bases. Troopons (SupportOurTroops.org) ships manufacturers' coupons donated from shoppers to military bases worldwide.

3. Spread out your donations by crafting a charitable-giving budget. List each charity to which you are currently donating, sorting them into categories: culture, politics, education, religion, community. Decide how much you want to give to each. If the first total is over your budget, review and repeat until you whittle it down to a manageable final figure. Then, when solicited, instead of feeling guilty, you can say, "I operate off a budget. I appreciate the work you do, but I have allocated my donations for this year." —*Laura Daily*