

CAMPING GEAR CARE

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Anything will last longer stored in air conditioning than in the garage during the Texas summer. Hardly anything will last long in the attic. I do store some of my gear in the garage, like metal cook pots and my boys' cheap Wal-Mart tents. But not the small stuff that easily fits in a box, and not the expensive stuff that would be hard to replace.

Sleeping Bag. Carrying. Expensive sleeping bags do not come with strings attached so you can fold them lengthwise, roll them up, and tie them into shape. High end sleeping bags come with stuff sacks. Start by unzipping the sleeping bag, or mostly unzipping it if the zipper is hard to get started. Throw the sleeping bag over your shoulder. Hold the stuff sack open with one hand and start cramming the sleeping bag in with the other, probably starting with one corner. When the whole sleeping bag is in, cinch the stuff sack closed. Stuff sacks come in various sizes. You will want one where the person camping can just get the whole sleeping bag into the stuff sack. That will make the stuff sack firm so it stays attached to the backpack. By stuffing rather than folding and rolling, the sleeping bag will get creased in a different place every time. I did not know this technique when I was a boy, and my sleeping bag developed unpadded creases where I always folded it in the same place.

After Use. Before the invention of washing machines and dryers, people relied on sunlight both to dry and disinfect their clothing. Whenever practical on a campout, I unzip or turn my sleeping bag inside out, fluff it a bit, and lay it over the top of my tent to air out for an hour or so. I always do this when I get home, outdoors if the weather permits. I never put my sleeping bag in the washing machine. But I have seen manufacturer instructions saying you can on cold or warm if it is a large front-loading washer with no agitator and use only a very mild laundry soap (if any, it will be going right back outdoors after all). I have also seen manufacturer instructions saying you can dry it on low heat in a large commercial dryer, but that cannot be easier than just air drying. Treat it gently like you would a woolen sweater. Do not subject it to dry cleaning chemicals.

Between Uses. Sleeping bags should be stored uncompressed. That means not in the same stuff sack that you can barely cram it into while camping. What makes a sleeping bag warm is air pockets, or "loft," and you do not want to compress those out. I personally store my sleeping bags thrown into the largest stuff bags available at Academy for about \$4. My small backpacking stuff sack goes in first, then the sleeping bag.

Backpack. Just treat it like a tent.

Tent. Cleaning Out. Before packing up a dome tent, and while the poles are still in it, I always unzip the door, hold the tent up in the air and put my head and arms inside, and then start slapping the tent. With the door facing down around my waist, most of the dirt and leaves fall out.

Rolling Up. To roll up a tent, push the poles out through the sleeves (you can't pull them). Lay it out flat, lay the fly on top, and fold stuff in until you have a rectangle. Fold the rectangle lengthwise either in half, thirds or quarters until it is the same width as the folded tent poles. Lay the poles across one end and start rolling it up. Go slowly to let the air out instead of exploding the tent out sideways. At the far end that is not being rolled, a helper should flip over about the last 12 inches so you have a clean seam at the end. They should also have their knees on that end to keep trapped air from exploding it out of shape. When rolled up, pick it up and tip it into the tent bag. You don't usually stuff a tent as indiscriminately as a sleeping bag. But the same ideas are there about not having to fold it perfectly along the same fold line each time and not storing it scrunched as hard as you can.

Drying Out / Washing. This is important. Weather allowing, I tip my tent over sideways in the morning before I fold it up so the bottom can also get dry. If there is any moisture at all on my tent when I fold it up to go home, I set it up again in the back yard or garage until it has dried thoroughly by adult standards. If is particularly dirty, I may use a hose on it in the backyard before drying it out.

Waterproofing. I have been known to spray a coat of Mildew-Resistant Scotch Guard on my tent fly, back pack, stuff sacks, or boots, especially cheaper quality items.

Zipper Lubrication. I have also been known to put a little bit of silicone gel on a zipper and run the zipper back and forth for 5 minutes, on my sleeping bag, backpack or tent. Zippers usually bust because of too much stress as the moving part moves over the teeth.

Rain Gear. Anything wet is likely to end up stinky from mildew or rot. To reuse raingear, you have to dry it out thoroughly by adult standards soon after returning home.

Lantern and Stove. Most stoves and lanterns come with instructions for annual maintenance. I will not attempt to do more than remind you to pay attention to those instructions.

First Aid Kit, Toiletries & Batteries. These items can all quit functioning just by getting old. Check them annually. Moleskin with last many years. Sunscreen in particular will lose much of its effectiveness and should be replaced after a year or 15 months. Matches can quit working because they get old, but they can quit working really fast if taken out on a cold, rainy campout. Check your matches more than just annually if there is any chance of moisture having gotten to them.

Pots, Pans, Canteens & Eating Utensils. I have a strict rule that upon returning home every bit of food related gear must go through the dishwasher before it gets stored away. This includes the stuff that never got used.

Coolers, Water Containers & Water Purification Gear. Use of Coolers. I have another very strict rule that nothing ever goes into my communal drinking water containers, including Igloo coolers, except water, ice, clorox to clean, and baking soda to clean. No hands. No drink mix. (I do sometimes put drink mix in my personal canteen, but it easily goes through the dishwasher after each trip.) This way I know my water supply can always be trusted to be clean. I have another very strict rule: No one ever eats ice from the rectangular food cooler in which we have at some point stored raw hamburger, etc. Guess why.

Drying. Canteens, jugs, flexible water containers and water purification gear should all be thoroughly dried out before it is stored away. I leave my canteens and water jugs sitting open in the hot summer sun for an afternoon if practical, or else indoors for a couple days. I have some flexible water bags that fold flat. They will not dry out unless propped open. I have a couple hangers dedicated to that purpose. Water purification gear should be pumped out till full of air, disassembled as much as possible, and allowed to thoroughly air dry. Sometimes that means sitting out for a week.

Purification. Items that cannot go through the dishwasher can be purified with bleach. It is very cheap to buy a small container of straight Clorox bleach at Wal-Mart. The recommended mixture is 2 Tablespoons of bleach per gallon of water, but I usually double the strength. Instructions will sometimes say 15 minutes, which does kill viruses and bacteria, but it takes 4 hours to kill the third category of pests called giardia. With my flexible bags, I fill them as much as possible with chlorinated water, lay them on one side overnight, on the other side through the next day, then empty and air dry. I don't do this after every trip, but I do it at least annually.

Dutch Oven. This one I do not claim to be any good at, but you will generally find something like this in the manufacturer's instructions: (1) upon purchase remove labels, clean with warm soapy water, and rinse in warm water to remove the protective coating that prevents rust while being shipped; (2) thoroughly dry by heating to 212 degrees; (3) while still warm from drying, lightly grease with cooking oil or bacon grease, not margarine or butter, and heat upside down for two hours at 400 degrees, this is called seasoning the pot; (4) clean while warm with hot water and wipe down with clean cloth, but do not use soaps or detergents and do not scour since that can remove the seasoning, and do not use cold water to cool since that may crack the pot; (5) avoid cooking acidic foods that can remove the seasoning, if food sticks after cooking acidic food then you will need to repeat seasoning process of steps 3-4; (6) signs of insufficient seasoning include discolored food, rust, and metallic taste, repeat the seasoning process of steps 3-4.

Knives & Axes. You may want to annually sharpen these items.