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The Thanksgiving Prep Timeline

Two weeks of small jobs instead of one impossible Wednesday. Dates shown are for Thanksgiving 2026, Thursday 26 November. Work down the list and the last day turns into cooking rather than catching up.

Two weeks out THU 12 NOV	Count the seats and settle the menu. Write down who is bringing what, then text it to them so it exists outside your head. Measure the roasting pan against your oven and the turkey against the pan, because that is the thing nobody checks until Thursday morning. Order the bird now if you want a fresh one.
Ten days out SUN 15 NOV	Do the non-perishable shop. Canned, dry, frozen, drinks, foil, storage bags, parchment, candles, batteries for the thermometer. Everything that will not spoil. This single trip is what saves you from the Tuesday-night store.
One week out THU 19 NOV	Make room and do the thaw math. Clear the freezer and a full fridge shelf. Work out your thaw start date from the weight table on page 2 and write it on the calendar. Test the meat thermometer in boiling water; it should read 212°F.
Five days out SAT 21 NOV	Start thawing a 16 to 20 lb bird. In the fridge, in a pan, breast up, still wrapped. A smaller bird starts later. See the table on page 2 and start a day early if you are unsure, since a thawed turkey holds safely in the fridge for a day or two.
Three days out MON 23 NOV	Fresh shop, and cook what keeps. Cranberry sauce, pie dough, stock, compound butter, salad dressing. All of it is better after a couple of days anyway.
Two days out TUE 24 NOV	Bake the pies. Do the chopping. Onions, celery and carrots into bags. Bread cubed and left out to stale for the stuffing. Iron the tablecloth today, not Thursday.
The day before WED 25 NOV	Brine, assemble, and set the table. Casseroles built but unbaked. Drinks in the cooler so they are not taking fridge space. Set every place, including the serving dishes, with a sticky note in each one saying what goes in it. Then write Thursday's oven schedule from page 2 and tape it to a cabinet door.
Thursday 26 NOV	Bird out of the fridge one hour before it goes in the oven. Then follow the plan on page 2 and do not open the oven to look at it.

The three things that actually go wrong

- **Oven space.** One oven, one turkey, and four things that all want 350°F at the same time. Page 2 fixes this.
- **Fridge space.** A thawing turkey takes a whole shelf for five days.
- **Thaw time.** A frozen bird on Wednesday cannot be rescued.

Worth handing to someone else

- Ice, drinks and the cooler
- Rolls and butter
- Appetizers, kept cold and simple
- One vegetable side, brought hot
- Pie, if they insist on baking
- Setting up chairs and the kids' table

WORK BACKWARDS FROM THE TABLE

Thursday, Hour by Hour

Fill in the time you want to sit down, then work up the page. Every other decision on Thursday follows from that one number.

Dinner served		The number everything else follows from
Sides out of oven		Dinner time minus 10 minutes
Sides go in		While the turkey rests, oven free
Turkey rests		30 minutes, loosely tented, not optional
Turkey out		When the thigh reads 165°F
Turkey in		Out time minus the roast time below
Oven to 325°F		30 minutes before the bird goes in
Bird out of fridge		One hour before it goes in

THAWING IN THE FRIDGE

WEIGHT	TIME IN THE FRIDGE
8 to 12 lb	2 to 3 days
12 to 16 lb	3 to 4 days
16 to 20 lb	4 to 5 days
20 to 24 lb	5 to 6 days

Roughly 24 hours for every 4 to 5 pounds. Round up. A bird that thaws early keeps safely in the fridge for another day or two.

ROASTING AT 325°F, UNSTUFFED

WEIGHT	ROAST TIME
8 to 12 lb	2¾ to 3 hours
12 to 14 lb	3 to 3¾ hours
14 to 18 lb	3¾ to 4¾ hours
18 to 20 lb	4¾ to 4½ hours
20 to 24 lb	4½ to 5 hours

A stuffed bird takes longer. Times are a guide only; the thermometer decides.

The thermometer decides, not the clock

165°F in the thickest part of the thigh, without touching bone, and check the breast too. Pull it at 165°F and let it rest; carry-over heat does the rest. Start checking an hour before you expect it to be done, because ovens lie and every bird is different.

OVEN TRAFFIC • WHAT GOES IN THE MOMENT THE TURKEY COMES OUT

Dish		Temp		Minutes	
Dish		Temp		Minutes	
Dish		Temp		Minutes	
Dish		Temp		Minutes	