

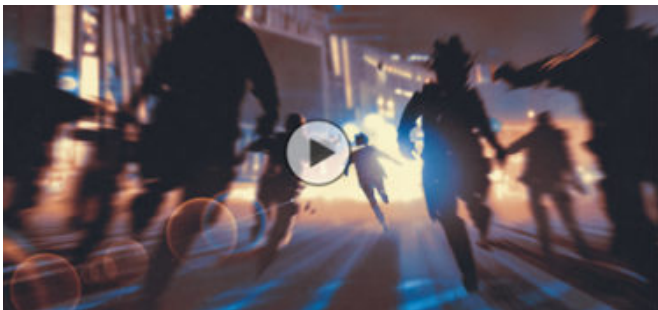
OPSEC and Your Neighbors

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One of the more challenging parts of being a prepper is keeping our activities secret. We all seem to agree that we shouldn't let people know what we are doing, so that they don't come knocking on our doors, when a disaster strikes. If they know we have food, they'll just be that much more insistent in their knocking.

But let's be real about this. Do you really think that your vegetable garden, solar panels and rainwater capture system have passed unnoticed by your neighbors? Probably not. Neighbors tend to be nosy and even those who are not can't miss seeing those things. They might not recognize the significance of those item, from a prepping point of view; but they'll know they are there. When a disaster strikes, they're likely to remember.

This is not to say that we should ignore the idea of OPSEC; merely that we might need to up the ante a bit if we want to hide it from our neighbors. A little camouflage and a little subterfuge might go a long way in helping to keep our neighbors in the dark.



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What's Secret and What's Not?

To start with, we need to develop a good understanding of which of our prepping activities are secrets and which are not. The advice that people pass around about being secretive in our purchases makes sense, to a point. But when those secretive activities are obvious in and of themselves, then the secret is lost. In other words, if you normally don't pull your pickup truck into the backyard to unload from a trip to Sam's or Costco, but do so when you're buying prepping supplies, it's going to attract unwanted attention. The neighbors will end up seeing you unload those bags or rice and beans.

A much better shopping strategy is to buy a little extra on each trip, so that it just looks like you're bringing home the groceries. Even a 50-pound bag of rice isn't going to seem suspicious, if there's just one mixed in with your other purchases. What makes is suspicious is having several of them.

So much of keeping things from your neighbors' eyes is about context. Where you live; what you normally do; and what your neighbors do all play a part. Owning a 4x4 truck in the middle of Texas is considered normal. But if you live in Washington, DC, it's going to look out of place. If you take that same truck and start setting it up to be "the ideal bug-out vehicle" it's going to stand out anywhere, unless you live in the midst of a community of hunters who all deck out their SUVs and trucks like that.

Hiding in Plain Sight

It's fairly easy to keep ordinary things out of sight, assuming that they truly are ordinary in the area where you live. The real challenge is dealing with things we can't hide from our neighbors and which tend to stand out. If everyone had a vegetable garden, then it wouldn't be hard to hide a vegetable garden. The same can be said for rainwater capture systems. With solar panels becoming more common place, the need to hide them has been diminishing.

But what do you do about the garden and the rainwater capture? Those seem to be the hardest things to hide.

Option one is to try and normalize what you're doing. When they ask about your garden, you can simply say that you like gardening... "and why aren't you growing one too?" While vegetable gardening isn't as commonplace today, as it was in the past, it is still not all that unusual.

Rainwater capture is a bit more unusual though. While there are some states which are encouraging people to harvest their rainwater, the percentage of people doing it in those states is still rather low. So, a bit of subterfuge might be necessary to go along with the rainwater capture. Explaining that you prefer to water your garden with rainwater, which doesn't have any chlorine in it, may make you seem a bit eccentric; but that's not the same as being suspicious.

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As a former engineer, I've used this idea to the maximum with my neighbors. I've always got some experiment going on, whether it is solar cooking, putting up a wind turbine, or trying to harvest dew for water. To cover that up, I've let it be known that I'm a semi-retired engineer. All my neighbors laugh about the "eccentric engineer and his experiment," but nobody seriously questions what I'm doing. The few questions I get are more on the order of curiosity, with people being genially interested in the technologies I delve into.

Rainwater capture can be hard to hide, especially if you use normal rain barrels. The explanation of using rainwater for watering the garden works to some extent; but you can only explain away so much water storage in that manner. When we're talking about storing a couple thousand gallons of water, we need something bigger, like a swimming pool. Runing the water from your rainwater capture into the swimming pool is just good conservation, saving water that's needed elsewhere.

Hiding Your Garden

The bigger challenge is hiding a vegetable garden. Most vegetable gardens are rather obvious and will quickly come to mind when there's a shortage of food. Telling your neighbor "No," when they know you have veggies growing in the backyard isn't very effective, as they can come over the fence as soon as it is dark, getting what they want. But can a vegetable garden be camouflaged as anything else?

There's a method of gardening known as "forest gardening" or a "food forest." where planting is done to mimic the way plants naturally grow in a forest. That means planting them randomly, mixing the different species together. This is so different than our normal way of planting a vegetable garden, that it would pass most people's notice. They would see it as a decorative garden, rather than a food source.

Planting a garden in such a manner starts with locating your fruit trees. Those need to be planted somewhat randomly (not in a line) and far enough apart, so as to leave room for planting other things in-between them. The next level would be to plant shrubs, such as berry bushes or vegetables like tomatoes and peppers, which grow up to a bush. Finally, plants which are lower to the ground are planted, again, keeping them random.

It is still possible to tell that such a garden is a vegetable garden, if you look close enough. But most people won't look that closely, so they'll miss what you've got growing in your yard. You can make this garden even harder to recognize, by mixing some decorative flowers and plants in with the things you're going to eat. When you harvest, be sure to do so randomly as well, so as to hide the idea that you're removing plants from your yard.

Be Prepared for the Neighbors

Regardless of how good a job you do at hiding your garden and your other preps, there's a good chance that your closest neighbors are going to see what's going on. Even if they don't reach the conclusion that you're a prepper, they will likely remember that you have food and water when they're in need. But even if they don't, you can pretty much count on people going around the neighborhood, seeing what others have and asking them to share. That would be a normal reaction, regardless of the circumstances.

Knowing that's going to happen, you have to have an answer ready. The typical one that most preppers say, at least now, before a disaster strikes, is that they won't help anyone. Are you really going to be able to do that, when the time comes? What if those neighbors are friends or their kids are playmates of your kids; could you still say "No?"

To be honest, I'm not sure I could. It's one thing to say no to someone I don't know or just barely know; but it's a whole lot harder to do so with friends or relatives. As much as I'd like to say no to them, rubbing it in by telling them they should have prepared when they had the time and opportunity, I just can't be that calloused.

So, what I've done is prepared, at least a little bit, to help my neighbors. I have a few hundred pounds of rice and beans stored up, which are for giving out to others. I've also stockpiled seed, so that I can help them start their own gardens. Then, when they come around looking for help, I'll have some available. It won't be as good as what my family is eating; but it will be something.



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There's one catch I've got built into that; they've got to be willing to work for it. I want something in trade. If that's just hauling water for their family and mine, that's enough for me. But they're going to have to be willing to help themselves. Hauling water is part of that; but they'll also need to be willing to work to plant and care for their own garden. I'll supply the seed and some knowledge, but they're going to supply the labor.

Conclusion

So, what's the sum of all my thinking here? It's that I realize that my ability to truly hide my actions from those living around me is limited. Even if I can fool them for now; that curtain will be easily torn when a disaster strikes and they run out of food. They might not realize before that time that I'm secretly preparing for a disaster, but they'll see my preparations as their potential salvation. That's what I have to be ready for.

Regardless of what any of us say, shooting our neighbors when they show up to ask for food isn't a good idea. Even if they try to steal our food, shooting them would attract too much attention. Others may choose to retaliate, but even if they don't, questions will be asked about why we shot them. That will let the secret of our preparedness out. Once that happens, we'll either be constantly repelling attacks or forced to bug out and find someplace else to hide. I'd rather stay put and let my neighbors be the buffer between me and those other people.

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