Amy Gebler says she’s “obsessed” with scoring delivery time slots for groceries, which have become a rarity as demand for doorstep drop-offs soars during the coronavirus crisis. “I have carts on three different platforms and I’m constantly refreshing,” said the 48-year-old single mom based in Seattle, one of the country’s first coronavirus hot spots.

During the day, the delivery websites for Amazon Fresh, Safeway and QFC, the local Kroger-owned chain, are a constant fixture on her laptop as she works. In the middle of the night, she’ll check the apps for availability. Once a time slot appears, Ms. Gebler snags it immediately, no matter what’s in the basket. “I have three teenagers in the house. Once I order food, it’s all gone within days.”

The deliveries are also often incomplete, since out-of-stock items are automatically removed. So she’ll fill up another cart and start repeatedly refreshing again. “It’s kind of my entertainment for the night,” Ms. Gebler said.

In many cities, in-store shoppers face long lines to enter, empty shelves for high-demand provisions and other stressed customers trying to maintain the sanctioned 6 feet of distance. Meanwhile, online, you peruse goods from the comfort of your couch and the haul is dropped off right at your front door. It’s not just about convenience: For high-risk people, essential workers and working parents, it’s a lifeline. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends home delivery or curbside pickup if possible.

That’s why delivery slots are getting scarce—and slot squatting is becoming a national pastime. With Instacart orders more than six times higher than they were at this time last year and stores limiting in-store traffic, you need to be quick to click. You also need to be careful: Some people are resorting to potentially harmful auto-refresh browser extensions and scripts.

I talked to companies providing delivery nationwide and shopping mavens like Ms. Gebler to get some answers: How do the many services differ and how do you set yourself up for checkout success? Here’s what they said.

**Instacart**

**Minimum order:** Starts at $35, varies by store
**Fees:** 5% or $2 minimum service fee plus various delivery fees starting at $3.99

**Membership:** Optional; $99-a-year Instacart Express; no extra delivery fee for orders $35 and up

**Locations:** 5,500 U.S. cities

**Pro tips:** Have your cart ready to go—delivery windows, when they are available, show up on the checkout page. An Instacart spokeswoman said the highest volume of orders is placed on Sundays, so avoid getting groceries that day if you can.

It’s a myth that new time slots are released at midnight. Delivery availability fluctuates throughout the day, according to the Instacart spokeswoman, so keep refreshing. And try different retailers: While a delivery window might not be open when shopping at one grocer, you might get one by picking another. (Fun fact: Instacart lets you buy from Costco without a membership.)

Pre-tipping can help, too. Instacart says shoppers pick from different batches of orders, and they can see details like each batch’s estimated tip and delivery distance before accepting.

Choose replacement items ahead of time, so you don’t have to worry about approving products in real-time (and potentially missing messages from the Instacart shopper). You can edit your cart until the shopper reaches the store, unlike the other services. Also, a new “Fast & Flexible” feature pairs you with the first available shopper, rather than pegging you to a specific delivery window.

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**Amazon Fresh/Whole Foods/Prime Now**

**Minimum order:** None; $35 minimum to avoid delivery fee

**Fees:** From $4.99 to $9.99

**Membership:** Exclusive to $119-a-year Prime members

**Locations:** Over 2,000 U.S. cities and towns across the three services

**Pro tips:** Like Instacart, you’ll want to have your items ready to go when a delivery time slot becomes available. The Alexa voice assistant can streamline this process: Say, “Alexa, add [product] to my Whole Foods cart.”

The home pages for Prime Now and Fresh show the day’s delivery availability, but you’ll want to refresh the checkout page for new delivery windows. Be sure to confirm your preferred address and payment method in account settings.
You may find more availability through Whole Foods in-store pickup. Amazon recently announced that the first hour of grocery pickup will be reserved for customers age 60 and older, those with disabilities and people defined as high risk. Participation is on the honor system—verification isn’t required.

Navigating this trifecta of Amazon same-day delivery—Prime Now, Fresh and Whole Foods—can be confusing, especially for customers with all three options in the same city. They all provide delivery in as soon as two hours with no extra fee, provided you’re a Prime member and spend at least $35. Currently, Prime members who are new to the services need to join a wait list in some cities.

The primary difference is selection. Whole Foods has a larger swath of organic produce and specialty items. Fresh offers groceries, plus pharmacy products like allergy medications and beauty products, as well as products like Kindles and clothing. Prime Now is a separate app that can fulfill Whole Foods pickup orders, and delivery from Amazon-owned services and select local stores.

**Walmart**

Minimum order: $30
Delivery Fees: Either $7.95 or $9.95, depending on the delivery window

Membership: Delivery included with $98-a-year (or $13-a-month) Delivery Unlimited; free 15-day trial

Locations: 1,600 U.S. cities

Pro tips: New time slots for delivery up to seven days in advance open up every morning, so check back for new windows then. While you’re able to reserve times before you shop, those times do expire, so it’s a good idea to have your cart ready for checkout. You can change your order after it’s placed, before the cutoff time, typically the same day as the scheduled delivery. The time is determined by anticipated in-store traffic—for example, if your scheduled date is a busy day for that location, the cutoff time for a 7 p.m. delivery could be 10 a.m. that morning, a Walmart spokeswoman said.

At checkout, you can select which items should be substituted if they’re out of stock, but you can’t pick the replacements.

You can also schedule a no-contact pickup, where an associate will place your groceries in your already open trunk. For the fastest service, when you arrive, check in and have your parking spot number ready.

General Tips

What about those Chrome extensions and scripts? There are a number of “delivery checker” browser tools that notify you of available delivery slots—but they’re not coded or even authorized by the retailers. They’re tempting, and some tech-savvy shoppers (including me) have used them successfully. But experts say there are serious risks with installing software from unknown authors.

Malicious browser extensions can harvest personally identifiable information, log keystrokes to obtain passwords or inject intrusive ads into sites, according to Ido Safruti, co-founder of security firm PerimeterX. Pay close attention to the permissions an extension asks for—an extension to help find Amazon delivery slots shouldn’t be able to read every website you visit, and it shouldn’t need access to data or keyboard events, he said.

As for scripts, Mr. Safruti says it’s impossible to know what they’re doing without reviewing the code. If you don’t understand scripting language and can’t verify the author, don’t run the script, he advised.
Use Nextdoor’s Help Map if you need a neighborly hand. The feature shows people in your vicinity who are willing to run errands on your behalf.

On Nextdoor’s feature Help Map, you can mark yourself as a neighbor who can run errands for people or enlist one of those volunteers for help.

PHOTO: NEXTDOOR

Check with local bakeries and restaurants. Many eateries are now selling produce and pantry items alongside their takeout menu. Delivery apps can help here: An UberEats search for “pantry” yielded a San Francisco bakery, offering bread flour, sold out nearly everywhere else, and another selling bleach, sanitizer, paper towels and toilet paper. A query for “produce” in Grubhub revealed a nearby brunch spot selling a veggie box and fresh eggs.

If you don’t need same-day delivery, try meal kits, farm boxes or restaurant suppliers. The caveat: You’ll pay a bit more, you won’t get to select your own produce and pantry staples, like cooking oil, typically aren’t available through these programs. LocalHarvest is a directory of farmers that sell goods directly to individuals. Imperfect Foods ships ugly produce and surplus products around the country. Meal-kit companies like Sun Basket and Hello Fresh are still taking new customers. Some restaurant-supply sites, like Choco (SF, Chicago, DC, Seattle, and NYC) and Pepper Pantry (serving greater NY and Boston areas), pivoted to home delivery.

Forming groups can be useful to meet minimums, but the apps make it tricky. If you and your neighbors pool together to make orders, you can often meet minimums more easily—especially with restaurant suppliers that require bulk orders. Instacart has a group-ordering feature that allows multiple accounts to add to the same order, but you would still have to divvy up the bill later. Also, many grocers impose item limits and when out-of-stock items need replacement approval, someone needs to make the call fast.

If you do share a delivery, always remember to take precautions in handling your neighbors’ groceries.

And finally, please tip—generously if you can. The gig workers doing your shopping are taking on the risk of potentially exposing themselves to infection, so customers can stay safe at home. That extra effort warrants a bigger tip than usual—so if you’re able, consider upping the amount.

Are you a slot squatter? Do you have online shopping-related questions? I’d love to hear all about it: Email me at nicole.nguyen@wsj.com. And don’t forget to sign up for our weekly newsletter for more WSJ Technology analysis, reviews, advice and headlines.
Write to Nicole Nguyen at nicole.nguyen@wsj.com

Corrections & Amplifications
Amy Gebler's name was misspelled Amy Gebier in an earlier version of this article.
(Corrected on May 3.)