



Waste Not, Want Not 10 Ways to Reduce Costly Food Waste

by Amber Lanier Nagle

Most of us regularly discard food items—week-old cooked pasta, stale cereal, half a loaf of moldy bread, suspicious leftovers and other foods we fail to eat before they perish. But consider that the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) reports that 40 percent of all edible food products in the United States—comprising 34 million tons—is wasted each year.

Food waste occurs at all levels of the supply chain. Farm fresh fruits and vegetables are often left unharvested because their appearance does not meet aesthetic standards imposed by grocery stores, and pieces bruised or marred during shipping and handling are routinely discarded. Many restaurants serve supersized portions of food, even though much of it is left on plates when customers leave, and thrown into dumpsters. Plus, many shoppers buy more than they need.

With a little care and a more enlightened system, we could help prevent much of the waste and better address hunger in the United States. Researchers estimate that Americans could feed 25 million people if we collectively reduced our commercial and consumer food waste by just 20 percent.

From an environmental standpoint, wasted food equals wasted water, energy and chemicals. Producing, packaging and transporting these food items generate pollution—all for nothing: a zero percent return on our dollars. Food waste represents the single largest component of all municipal solid waste now going into landfills. Although it is biodegradable when properly exposed to sunlight, air and moisture, decomposing food releases significant amounts of methane, a heat-trapping greenhouse gas that is more than 20 times more potent than carbon dioxide (CO₂).

Ten tips make it possible to reduce our “food print”.

Shop smarter. Preplan meals for the week, including non-cooking days and leftover days. Make a shopping list and stick to it after inventorying the pantry, fridge and freezer. Buy produce in smaller quantities to use within a few days. Because we tend to overbuy when we’re hungry, don’t walk the aisles with a growling stomach.

Organize the refrigerator. Place leftovers at eye level in the fridge, so they are front-and-center anytime someone opens it. When stowing groceries, slide older items to the front. Pay attention to use-by dates and under-

stand that food is good for several days beyond a sell-by date.

Freeze foods. Many food items will last for months in the freezer in appropriate storage bags and containers.

Share surplus food. For larger dishes such as casseroles and crockpot meals, invite a friend over for supper, deliver a plate to an elderly neighbor or pack leftovers to share with co-workers. Donate extra nonperishable or unspoiled food items to a local soup kitchen, food bank or pantry or homeless shelter.

Store food properly. To maximize food's edible life, set the fridge between 35 and 38 degrees Fahrenheit and arrange containers so that air circulates around items; the coldest areas are near the back and bottom of the unit. For fruits and vegetables stored in plastic bags or designated bins or containers, squeeze out air and close tightly to reduce the damaging effects of exposure to oxygen.

Buy ugly fruits and veggies. Grocery stores and markets throw out a substantial volume of vegetables and fruits because their size, shape or color is deemed less than ideal. Purchase produce with cosmetic blemishes to save perfectly good, overlooked food from being discarded as waste.

Use soft fruits and wilted vegetables. Soft, overripe fruits can be converted to jellies, jams, pies, cobblers,

milkshakes and smoothies. Wilted carrots, limp celery, soft tomatoes and droopy broccoli can be chopped up and blended into soups, stews, juices and vegetable stocks.

Dish up smaller portions. Smaller portions are healthier and allow leftovers for another meal.

Take home a doggie bag. Only about half of restaurant diners take leftovers home. Ask to have unfinished food boxed in a recyclable container, and then enjoy it for lunch or dinner within two days.

Compost routinely. If, despite daily best efforts, food waste still occurs, recycle it with meal preparation scraps into a nutrient-rich soil amendment. Create an outdoor compost heap, or compost cooked and uncooked meats, food scraps and small bones quickly and without odor in an indoor bokashi bin.

"Earth Day—April 22nd—serves as a reminder that each of us must exercise personal responsibility to think globally and act locally as environmental stewards of Earth," says Kathleen Rogers, president of Earth Day Network. "Reducing food waste is another way of being part of the solution."

Amber Lanier Nagle is a freelance writer specializing in how-to articles pertaining to Southern culture, healthy living and the environment.