

FEBRUARY 2012

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What a Waste

Food that goes into the trash can hurt your pocketbook and the planet.

Your grandmother may not have been worrying about climate change and the environment when she made you clean your plate—

but her advice could help save the earth.

Every year, 160 billion pounds of food are tossed into trash bins across America, according to the US Department of Agriculture. It means that up to *half* of all of the tomatoes, peppers, apples, pears and other fresh produce bought in this country is never eaten.

“It doesn’t make sense to throw away so much food,” laments Jonathan Bloom, author of *American Wasteland: How America Throws Away Nearly Half of Its Food* (Da Capo). “Food waste is a serious problem but it’s one that we can have a significant impact on.”

Kristen Cross, 33, started paying more attention to food waste in 2008 when she cleaned out her refrigerator and accumulated a large pile of spoiled foods on her kitchen counter. “I was shocked at how much food I’d wasted,” recalls Cross, a stay-at-home mom of four. “I knew it was a lack of planning; I’d go to the grocery store and haphazardly buy foods without a plan for what to do with them.”

Once she realized how much food (and money) she was wasting, Cross

started a personal campaign to reduce food waste. She launched “Food Waste Friday” on her blog (www.thefrugalgirl.com) and posted weekly photos of her food waste as a means of holding herself accountable for the amount of food she was tossing in the trash.

buying healthy food,” she recalls. “Then I realized there was no point in buying really healthy food if I was going to let it rot.”

According to Bloom, the average American family spends approximately \$2,220 per year on food that is never eaten.

It’s not just your pocketbook that feels the pain of wasted food. The environment suffers, too.

Of the almost 35 million tons of food waste generated in 2010, almost 34 million tons, or 97%, was thrown away into landfills or incinerators. The amount of food sent to landfills doubled between 1980 and 2007, and food waste is now the second largest contributor to the solid waste stream after paper products, according to the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

“We need to look at food waste from an environmental perspective,” says Jean Schwab, senior program analyst for the EPA’s National Food Recovery Challenge. “When food waste goes to the landfill, it starts to generate methane, a gas that is 23 times more potent than carbon dioxide” as a greenhouse gas, one capable of trapping heat in the atmosphere.

Wasting food also wastes the resources used to grow crops, including water and fertilizer. And disposing of food waste wreaks havoc on the environment because of the emissions associated with hauling food



A Staggering Cost

With each weekly shopping trip, Cross found herself restocking her refrigerator with produce she’d just thrown in the garbage can. It was an expensive lesson. “I used to load up my cart with produce and feel so virtuous about

Photo by Pauline St. Denis/Corbis

waste to landfills. Research published in *Environmental Science and Technology* found that the US could reduce its annual energy consumption by 2%—equivalent to saving 350 million barrels of oil—simply by reducing the amount of food wasted.

Take a Tally

The first step in reducing food waste is conducting a personal food audit, notes Bloom. Take a look at how much food is being wasted and consider the reasons it's going bad: Is produce buried (and forgotten) in the back of the refrigerator? Did eating takeout trump polishing off the leftovers?

The EPA's Food Recovery Hierarchy, depicted as an inverted pyramid (see graphic to the right) illustrates preferred options to make the most of excess food. In the first year of the EPA's Food Recovery Challenge, participants commit to increasing by at least 5% the amount of food they divert from landfills or incinerators through prevention steps such as modifying the amounts of food bought or reducing portion sizes during meals, composting, or donating food to food banks, soup kitchens and shelters. In 2010, more than 14% of US households could not count on regular meals, according to the EPA.

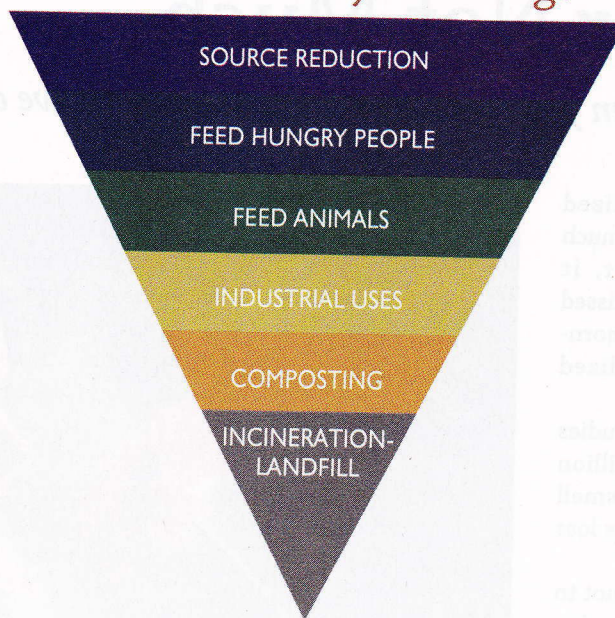
Perishable and prepared foods are often collected from restaurants, caterers, corporate dining rooms and hotels. Donated food includes leftovers from events and products affected by expired coupons or code dates.

When Cross decided to tackle the food waste in her home, she started in her refrigerator. "I realized that I was buying a lot of food with good intentions but I never used it," she recalls. "I started looking in the fridge every day to see what was on the verge of going bad and needed to be used up. Then I started finding new ways to use those foods."

Cross adds mushrooms and onions to scrambled eggs, bakes with almost-

spoiled fruit and turns sour milk into pudding. When food does spoil, Cross adds it to the backyard compost pile where it breaks down into nutrient-rich soil for her garden.

Food Recovery Challenge



Bloom believes buying less food and shopping more often are two keys to reducing food waste. "We hate the sight of a sparse refrigerator so we stuff our fridges full of food; in terms

of reducing waste, it's better to have less food in the refrigerator," he explains. Creating a weekly meal plan and making a shopping list can help cut back on the kinds of impulse purchases that lead to food waste.

Eating leftovers also allows for better food usage. "Instead of asking, 'What do I want to eat?' and cooking a new meal, ask, 'What do I have to eat?'" Schwab suggests.

Strategies like these have worked for Cross, who has cut her food waste significantly over the past three years. "I still have a little wasted food at the end of the week but the amount is very small compared to what I was wasting before," she says.

—Jodi Helmer