

Is Your Waste Expanding?

There's a good chance you'll soon enjoy another delicious holiday meal with family and friends leaving you with ample leftovers to finish off after the main meal is consumed. Or perhaps you won't have the time to freeze or cook other meals with your leftovers before they go bad. If you find yourself in the latter category, you're not alone. Food wastage is a worldwide problem.

Globally close to half the food grown in the world ends up being spoiled. Some 30% or 6 billion pounds of North American produce lies wasting in farm fields or on supermarket shelves because it's not attractive and perfect enough for picky consumers. Some food spoils before it can be harvested or is wasted during processing and transportation. Once brought home from the store, **one in four perishable items we buy gets tossed out before it is completely consumed!** The food industry is partly to blame. Consumers are confused by "best before" dates, believing that food consumed after this date is spoiled and must be thrown out. However, the "best before" date is placed on food items by manufacturers to indicate when quality and nutritional content begin to decline and is not an "expiry" date.

The food industry encourages wastage also by encouraging us to over-purchase meat, dairy and produce in an attempt to get us through the supermarket doors. "Buy-one-get-one-free" and family-sized packaging are two examples of this technique. The sale of large-sized packages of perishables at stores like Costco is another. Not all perishable food is a deal if it is not consumed or frozen for later consumption before it spoils.

It's estimated that \$27 billion worth of food is wasted in Canada annually. That's about 215 kilograms or \$600 worth of food per household! The figures are even higher in other parts of the world. In the US, the average household discards 12% of all meat, 26% of all vegetables and 24% of all fruit purchased every month! In developing countries, less food is wasted once it gets to the consumer, (only about 6%) but spoilage is still a major problem due to insufficient harvesting, rodent and insect infestations of crops, and inefficient processing, storage and transportation capabilities.

Why should all of this concern us, after all, food in Canada is plentiful and relatively inexpensive. But concerns surrounding discarded food in our world go beyond our borders.

One billion people around the world are currently underfed. To make matters worse, it is estimated that by 2050 there will be 9 billion mouths to feed on our planet! While many in the food industry are pushing for a 60% increase in food production to handle this future challenge, it comes with costs. How will this 60 % increase in production come about; more genetically-modified foods, more mega-farms, more miracle foods?

Food production uses vast amounts of the earth's natural resources, especially precious clean water. When we waste food, we also waste all the resources that went into producing and distributing that food. Methane gas from discarded produce and meats leak into the atmosphere from landfills; adding to our greenhouse gas emissions.

Will increasing food production alone solve the population explosion expected by 2050? Are we missing the point? Why don't we simply decide to create less food waste? This is an idea whose time has come. **By not wasting edible food, we could get about a quarter of the way to feeding the world's hungry in the future.**

Let's become aware of our own wasteful habits and encourage governments, private companies, non-profit organizations and researchers to find ways to limit food wastage from farm field to table before we run out of time.

The following are some helpful hints for you to get started at becoming a more thoughtful and less wasteful food consumer. Focussing on reducing our own wasteful habits at home would good for both the planet and our pocketbooks!

Helpful Hints to Reduce Food Wastage in Your Home

- Don't wash food until you're ready to consume it. Moisture encourages decomposition and mould growth.
- Don't rip off stems until ready to consume. Once living cells are broken, microorganisms start to grow. Keep produce whole as long as possible.
- Eat the most perishable foods first.
- Take produce out of plastic bags. Airtight wrappings suffocate fresh produce and speed up the decaying process.
- Some produce, such as bananas, tomatoes and avocados, are cold-sensitive so refrigeration accelerates spoilage. Once ripened, only keep these foods in your fridge for a short amount of time.
- If your produce starts to go soft, put it in a cup of cold water for an hour to freshen it.
- Put fresh herbs and greens like kale and swiss chard in a knotted plastic bag with 1 to 2 tablespoons of water to keep them fresh longer.
- Bake to use up fruits and dairy before they spoil.
- Make stir-fries or soups to use up wilting veggies and small amounts of leftover meat.

Keep a whiteboard near the fridge. Put perishables on the list and erase them once they're used up so that you know what you need to replenish when planning meals.

- Rearrange your fridge so that the most perishable items are the most visible.
- Use meat and fish scraps for making stock for soups and stews. Freeze them to use later if you don't have time right away.
- Freeze over-ripened bananas with the skins on to use for baking or in smoothies at a later date. No need to wrap!
- Peppers and green onions can be washed, cleaned, chopped and frozen ready-to-use in ziplock bags.
- Lemons and limes can be chopped in half and frozen in ziplock-type bags. Frozen citrus fruits are often easier to zest as well.

Sources

"*junk food*". Modern Farmer magazine, issue #2, Fall 2013
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