

Daily Union Article
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Title: What a Waste!

As a child assigned to various household chores, I particularly remember KP duty and the often smelly, slimy, and downright gross task of cleaning out the refrigerator. It was all too easy to bring groceries home from the store and lose track of what we already had on hand. Sometimes leftovers got overlooked because there wasn't enough for more than a snack for someone in our 6-member household. What a waste!

In America, we waste about 40% of all edible food— with the majority of that waste coming from consumers. The U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that the average American household throws away between \$28-\$43 (or ~20 pounds) of food each month.

This kind of waste is costing us more than the food itself. There is a loss of as much as 25% of all freshwater used in the United States; a loss of \$750 million per year for disposal of the food, and 33 million tons of landfill waste. The USDA shares that a typical American throws out 40 percent of fresh fish, 23 percent of eggs, and 20 percent of milk. Some of the more commonly wasted fresh produce includes cherries, sweet potatoes, and greens. We can't afford to continue our wasteful trend.

The United Nations predicts that we'll need up to 70% more food by 2050 to feed the 9-10 billion people population that is predicted to live on the planet by then. These staggering statistics should motivate each of us to be more proactive in developing habits that reduce food waste in our homes and restaurants. Here are some suggestions offered by the National Resources Defense Council to reduce food waste in America:

Habit #1 – Smart Shopping: In order to reduce food waste, develop the habit of planning your trip to the grocery store AND the meals you prepare at home. Use a list to avoid impulse buying or buying too much of any one item. A sale item is only a good buy if you use the product before it expires.

Habit #2 – Don't Discriminate: When you are looking for fresh fruits and vegetables, don't be afraid to pick up the blemished or odd-shaped ones. These items may be perfectly good to eat, but often get overlooked when on display in the store or at a farmer's market. This food goes to waste when it is not selected by the consumer.

Habit #3 – Learn to Distinguish Good from Bad: Not all foods are bad simply because they have passed their "use by" or "sell by" date. Generally, these label dates

are not federally regulated except in the case of certain baby foods. The manufacturer's use these suggestions to indicate when the food is at its peak quality. For example, eating bread a couple of days after the "sell by" date on the package is perfectly safe. If it's been even longer than that and the bread seems slightly dry, you can season the bread and make homemade croutons or breadcrumbs. You can pick up a copy of *Safe Food Storage: The Cupboard (No: MF3131)* at the Geary County Extension office that will give you the correct shelf life of a variety of common foods.

Habit #4 – Request Smaller Portions: When you are out for lunch or dinner, ask the wait staff if they have a smaller portion size menu available. Many restaurants will provide half-portions if requested. This reduces that amount of uneaten food going in the trash and may prevent you from overeating when you are full.

Habit #5 – Eat Leftovers: If you are dining out and can't finish your food, ask the restaurant to pack the extra for you to enjoy later at home. If you don't want the leftovers relatively soon, freeze them to use in the future. Research shows that only about half of Americans take leftovers home from restaurants. Leftovers need attention on the home front, as well. If you have trouble knowing when food was put in the refrigerator start developing the habit of dating your food with the date it was prepared and refer to "Safe Food Storage: The Refrigerator and Freezer (No: MF3130)" available at the Geary County Extension office to know how long to store them.

Habit #6 – Donate Regularly: Don't wait until the annual food drive at your church or with the civic organization you belong to. If you over purchased a sale item, give the excess to your local food pantry. Check your home pantry monthly and weed out foods that are nearing their "use by" or "sell by" date. Non-perishable unopened canned foods can be stored in a cool place for 12 months or longer.

Habit #7 – Use Your Freezer: Prepare double batches of favorite casseroles, soups, and other recipes that will freeze well. Cook one to use now and place the second batch in a freezer safe container to cook and enjoy in the future. This habit reduces waste, saves money, and helps with time management when it comes to meal preparation on a busy week night or weekend.

Being aware of the cost and impact food waste has on our resources is a great first step for reducing the problem. The Natural Resources Defense Council reports that 25 million people could be fed if we reduced American food waste by only 15 percent. That means if every American reduced their monthly food waste by a mere 3 pounds, we could feed the entire state of Texas or the entire country of Taiwan for over a year.

For more information about food storage and safety, contact me at the Geary County Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!