

Making Ripples

by Amanda Bancroft

Food waste is money wasted. The National Resources Defense Council reported in 2012, “American families throw out approximately 25 percent of the food and beverages they buy. The cost estimate for the average family of four is \$1,365 to \$2,275 annually.” To visualize that, picture one out of every four grocery bags getting stolen, forgotten, or torched by a dragon in the parking lot. Yikes!

One obvious solution is to compost kitchen scraps if you can. Making Ripples has covered composting in a previous column [here](#). But what if you don’t need to use as much compost as you’re producing (in the case of not farming or gardening) and want to save money by not buying more food than needed? Or it could be that you want to eat more of that fresh produce going to waste, and less of the shelf-stable junk food.

First, it’s good to get familiar with “sell by” and “best by” dates for the products you purchase, and learn how to determine when food is actually unsafe to eat or simply less fresh. When in doubt, throw it out (into a compost pile, hopefully). Many product dates don’t indicate that the product will be bad on that day. It’s tricky, and not something easily intuited if there isn’t obvious mold, smell, or discoloration. Yet the goal doesn’t have to be “eat it before it makes you sick.” What if we focus on freshness and enjoyment of food, as a motivator to eliminate waste?

The key seems to be not to forget about it. One strategy is to label leftovers or spare ingredients yourself. You can do this with a sharpie marker on the packaging, or a post-it note stuck to a bowl, container lid, or bag. Another method is to make a chalk or dry erase board dedicated to the refrigerator. Artisans at War Eagle Mill craft fairs make smaller, hand-painted decorative boards for this and other small-scale purposes. On your board, write the name of the food and the date you suspect it will go bad. Put a red star next to produce or things which only last a couple of days due to already being partly consumed. When you’re hungry or planning the next meal, use the list to guide your choices. In this way, you can eat food at its best and not necessarily its worst.

You can even line up and label boxed goods in a cupboard in order of their expiration date. This prevents having to search the packages awkwardly for the printed date time and again, and you won’t have items from the last decade hogging precious kitchen space! Another rather radical idea is to downgrade to a mini fridge or smaller unit. It’s easier to see everything inside, and less likely that leftovers will be forgotten.

The best place to start might be during meal planning and grocery shopping. Plan to cook the quantity of food that best fits your family size or leftover goals. Don’t buy more than you think you need. Buy in bulk if possible, so that you pay for and cook only what’s called for in a recipe (unless you’re buying flour or other staples).

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