

clean
out
freezer

eat more
fruit and
veggies!

organize
pantry

find
compost
bin



creative ways to waste less food and save more money

Americans send 52.4 million tons of food to the landfill each year, according to (ReFED, 2016). It is difficult to comprehend this scale of waste. Picture a 40-ton tractor filling up with food and throwing it away every 20 seconds (ReFED, 2016). On average, a family of four discards between \$1365 and \$2275 in food annually (Bloom, 2011). While food gets wasted in some households, others are struggling with hunger. At some point during a year, one in eight households in the U.S. (this includes children and the elderly) do not have enough foods for all household members to live an active, healthy life (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbitt, Gregory, & Singh, 2017).

The good news is there are many simple solutions for the everyday Montanan. Challenge yourself to try one of the below options to work on or consider starting with one strategy that sounds easy and another that might be a little more difficult. Share the experience with friends or co-workers.

1. **Make the freezer a friend.** Need just a tablespoon of tomato paste? Save the rest in a container and freeze it until the next batch of famous chili. This works for a lot of other things too – drained canned beans, cubed partially-cooked squash, tortillas, and roasted veggies. Portion meals that you cannot eat within 3-5 days into individual servings and freeze for later. Make sure to date and label the foods and use airtight freezer tight bags (get the air out) or sealed containers.
2. **Eat fruits and veggies.** In North America, about half of all fruits and vegetables are thrown away (FAO, 2011). To reduce this food waste, use

all edible parts of a plant. For example, carrot tops can be made into a delicious pesto. Avoid peeling produce with edible peels such as carrots, potatoes (including sweet potatoes), beets, and apples. Remember to give these an extra scrub to clean the outer skin before cooking or eating. Keep pre-packaged lettuce's use-by date in mind when planning meals. Undressed salad lasts longer in the fridge than a dressed salad, so be sure to add salad dressing to individual salads instead of the entire serving bowl. Extra produce can be repurposed. Use leftover greens in non-traditional ways, i.e. scrambled eggs, stir fry, and even soup.

3. Start a compost pile or bin. Composting food waste saves space in the landfill and reduces methane gas emissions. Some towns in Montana offer curbside compost pick-up, but setting up a compost area is easier than you might think. Select an area a short distance from the house to avoid unpleasant smells and turn compost every now and then to mix fresh air inside. This nutrient-rich material can be added to a garden bed to improve the health of the soil. Healthy soil is the foundation for healthy food. Check out the *Home Composting MontGuide (MT199203AG)* for tips on what should and should not be added to a compost bin.

4. Eat from the pantry. Rather than planning all meals in advance, create a meal or plan a grocery list around the hodgepodge of ingredients in the refrigerator, freezer, or pantry. Have a couple of carrots, some broccoli or broccoli stalks, peanut butter, soy sauce, and rice? That sounds like the foundation of a delicious stir fry. Be creative. Mix a can of tuna with fork-smashed chickpeas, diced veggies, lemon juice, olive oil, and salt and pepper and serve with chips. Or add chickpeas, kale and a tahini- or cashew-based sauce to a bowl of rice. Options are unlimited.

5. Plan meals and snacks in advance. It sounds intuitive, but a little planning can save money on food purchases. Have you ever bought a bunch of herbs and only needed half? If soup or stir fry calls for cilantro, then plan another meal to use the other portion. This method is helpful for situations when pre-bagged produce is the only available option. For example, if you have extra carrots in the bag, make or buy hummus or another favorite dip to help use the carrots.

6. Process or donate garden produce. Did you grow extra produce you cannot eat and don't have time to store? Some food banks accept excess garden produce donations; contact the local food bank for their policy on garden donations. If you have time to process the extra produce, make things you know you will eat. If you typically use tomato sauce for pasta sauce or soup, make a big batch of canned or frozen tomato sauce for use as needed. Blanch and freeze vegetables like peas, green beans, and corn to use later. Check to see if the local Extension office is offering a food preservation class or check out the *Freezing Vegetables MontGuide (MT200908HR)* for helpful resources.

Although reducing food waste is a good goal, there are some foods which should not be salvaged, including ground beef that has been thawed in the fridge for more than two days, potatoes with large green spots and sprouts, soft cheeses with mold, and high-water-content fruits and vegetables that have mold-like bell peppers and peaches. If you aren't sure food might be spoiled, consult the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Food Safety page to learn how to safely cook, clean and store foods for the longest time.

In addition to the ideas presented above, the resources below offer more ways to prevent food waste. Try some ideas and remember that the most effective strategies are those used consistently. Employing even a couple strategies is a good start to keeping food safer and of higher quality, saving money and keeping waste out of the landfill. ■

- *Rethink Food Waste Through Economics and Data (ReFED)*, 2016. http://www.refed.com/downloads/ReFED_Report_2016.pdf.
- Bloom, J. (2011). *American Wasteland*, p 187.
- Coleman-Jensen, A., Rabbitt, M. P., Gregory, C., & Singh, A., 2017. <http://www.feedingamerica.org/assets/pdfs/fact-sheets/poverty-and-hunger-fact-sheet.pdf>
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2011. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/014/mb060e/mb060e00.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018. www.foodsafety.gov

