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Here's a menu of strategies to avoid wasting good food

By Tom Watson

Special to The Times

In a land of big appetites, a surprising amount of food gets left on the table.

The average U.S. household wastes 14 percent of its food at a cost of about \$600 per year, a University of Arizona study found.

This particular waste of resources leaves a bad taste in our mouths because more than 35 million people in the U.S. are hungry or unsure where their next meal will come from. The growing, processing and transportation of wasted food also contributes significantly to global warming.

Q: Here in the Seattle area, many of us can now put all our food scraps in our yard-waste collection bin. So we're not really wasting that food anymore, are we?

A: Those food scraps collected from residents do get turned into a compost product sold at local stores, and we're fortunate to have that service available in this region. But that's certainly not the best use for food. Ideally our food scraps would consist mainly of coffee grounds, bones, trimmings and other detritus of food preparation, but in many cases the food waste that gets composted is edible food.

Q: What are the main ways we waste edible food at home?

A: Many folks throw away uneaten food after a meal without even trying to save it. When we do keep leftovers, they may get forgotten at the back of the fridge and turn into science projects. Food in cans or jars often never makes it out of the cupboard and eventually gets tossed. And this time of year, much of the bounty from our home fruit trees and vegetable gardens rots on the vine because we can't keep up with the harvest.

Q: How can we reduce food waste when shopping and cooking?

A: Avoid "impulse" purchases of food you may never eat. You might do this by doggedly sticking to your shopping list, or even by avoiding the massive supermarkets with a million choices. Those fruits and veggies that look so gorgeous in the store can quickly spoil, so make sure you have a plan for eating them.

Soups were made for using up food. Your parents or grandparents may have lived through tough times, so ask them for suggestions for soups and other food-saving recipes.

Two great online resources are www.WastedFood.com, from North Carolina-based food-waste expert Jonathan Bloom, and the British government-funded program www.LoveFoodHateWaste.com. In addition to recipes and tips on those Web sites, you can find no-waste recipes in many cookbooks or by searching online for "leftovers recipes."

Q: How do I keep my refrigerator from being the place where leftovers go to die?

A: You're much more likely to eat leftovers when you can clearly see them in the fridge. Use transparent plastic or glass containers and label the lid. When you have a party or big family dinner, divide leftovers into small portions and send them home with guests.

Q: Do I need to throw out food when it's past the expiration date?

A: Not necessarily. The "best if used by" date is the manufacturer's recommendation for best flavor or quality, but does not mean food is unsafe after that date. Real Simple magazine has compiled guidelines (www.organizeyourlife.org/expiration.htm) for how long various foods will last, opened and unopened.

Q: Let's go outside for one last question. What are the best ways to make sure all the fruit and veggies from our yard and garden get used?

A: Pick your veggies nearly every day this time of year to reduce garden waste. Area food banks (www.NorthwestHarvest.org) would love to receive donations of vegetables, herbs and fruit from your yard. If you need someone to come harvest your trees so the fruit can be donated, call the Seattle Tilth Garden Hotline at 206-633-0224 or visit www.CityFruit.org. The food banks need your fruit more than the squirrels do.

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