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EcoConsumer

Common sense ways to reduce food waste

As the holiday season reaches its peak, many of us want to reduce the waste and "stuff" related to gifts, wrapping and decorating. But let's not forget the waste generated as we're getting stuffed. All the unwanted and discarded food from holiday meals, parties and gifts adds up to mountains of food waste, much of it preventable.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

As the holiday season reaches its peak, many of us want to reduce the waste and "stuff" related to gifts, wrapping and decorating. But let's not forget the waste generated as we're getting stuffed.

All the unwanted and discarded food from holiday meals, parties and gifts adds up to mountains of food waste, much of it preventable.

Q: Is holiday food waste really that much of a concern?

A: Food waste is a significant problem all year around. An average American family of four wastes more than \$2,200 worth of food each year, says Jonathan Bloom, a North Carolina-based food-waste expert.

In his new book, "American Wasteland: How America Throws Away Nearly Half of Its Food (and What We Can Do About It)," Bloom describes environmental and social impacts from food waste, including the resources used to transport and dispose of it and the constant need for food at food banks.

Food makes up about 18 percent of the residential waste going into King County's Cedar Hills Landfill. Wasted food from restaurants, supermarkets and farms also contributes to the overall problem referred to in Bloom's title.

During the holidays, we generate three times as much food waste as normal, according to Timothy Jones, a former University of Arizona anthropology researcher who has studied food waste since the 1990s.

Q: Besides the sheer abundance of holiday food, what other factors contribute to this seasonal food waste?

A: Holiday parties and dinners often feature unfamiliar food and drinks, and one of Bloom's truisms is that uncommon foods get wasted more frequently. We usually end up with what he calls "recipe one-timers," obscure ingredients such as bitters or malted barley flour that we need once and then never use again. To avoid that trap, get creative to use up those items later, offer the extra to a friend, or consider skipping those ingredients or substituting for them.

Leftovers frequently bite the dust over the holidays. During and after meals, don't leave foods out at room temperature for more than two hours, to avoid health risks. When you have lots of food remaining from dinners or parties, distribute leftovers to guests to take home, based on what they like.

Q: Any other holiday food-waste reduction secrets?

A: If you serve a big green salad, Bloom advises, don't add dressing to the whole bowlful because then the leftovers won't last as long. Offer dressing on the side instead.

Another Bloom food-waste maxim: The more food that goes on the plate, the more likely it is for people to waste it or overeat. He suggests using "smallish" serving spoons and avoiding giant dinner plates. Let your

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waste it or overeat. He suggests using smaller serving spoons and avoiding giant dinner plates. Let your guests serve themselves to make sure they get exactly the amount and type of food they want.

Q: It seems like more people give food gifts now. How can you reduce waste from those?

A: Don't give food as a present unless you're sure the recipient will like it. For unopened food gifts you receive that no one in your household wants, donate them to a food pantry serving the hungry. Find one near you at www.ampleharvest.org/find-pantry.php (and consider a holiday donation of cash to those indispensable charity food operations).

Steer clear of highly perishable food gifts, Bloom recommends. Coffee and chocolate are often well-received, especially here in the Seattle area. A gift certificate to a restaurant or a gourmet deli makes a practical, low-waste food gift.

Q: What about food we can't eat or donate?

A: Compost it! Most Greater Seattle residents can put food scraps and food-soiled paper in their yard-waste collection containers, destined for a regional composting facility. You can also compost certain foods yourself at home in a worm bin. See King County's www.recyclefood.org for more information.

Food enhances the holidays no matter how we celebrate them, but food waste is an uninvited guest that doesn't need a seat at the table. Happy holidays, and bon appétit!

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