



**Home Food Safety™**

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## **Produce from Purchase to Plate: Steps to Reduce Food Waste**

*by Jackie Newgent, registered dietitian nutritionist*

Our farmers produce more food than we need to feed America. Unfortunately, the generous supply of vegetables and fruits in this country is often taken for granted by many who have easy access to it.

In fact, a National Resources Defense Council report finds that roughly 40 percent of all edible food produced in America is not eaten. Based on food and beverages thrown out, up to \$2,275 is wasted each year by a typical family of four in this country.

Fresh foods make up most of the discarded food. The average American wastes about 20 percent of the vegetables and 15 percent of the fruits inside and outside of the home. Unfortunately, we're tossing out more than the previous generation.



### **Why does this matter?**

While farmers work diligently to assure high crop yields to feed us all, there is much that is out of our control, including loss that can occur between the farm and our forks. But we can be conscientious consumers and take proper care of vegetables and fruits from purchase to plate. By doing so, we can save money, have a greater ability to feed the hungry and play a positive role in the reduction of produce waste, which means a reduction in landfill use and the corresponding methane emissions.

### **Steps to prevent excess produce waste**

#### **1. Select fruits and vegetables wisely**

- Buy just what you need. Beware of bulk discounts, since fresh produce has a limited shelf life.
- Purchase fresh produce toward the end of shopping trips.
- Shop farmers markets early so the heat of the day doesn't alter quality or hasten ripening.
- Don't hunt for perfect; embrace produce imperfections. But steer clear of vegetables or fruits that are overly bruised or otherwise damaged.

## 2. Store produce properly

- Store any perishable fresh produce, like berries and leafy greens, in a clean refrigerator set to 40°F or below. *Hint:* If produce is sold refrigerated at a grocery store, it generally should be refrigerated at home to maintain quality.
- Produce can give off *ethylene gas* during ripening, which can contribute to overly quick ripening of other produce when stored together. Produce that make this gas include (for room temperature storage) avocados, under-ripe bananas, mango, nectarines, papaya, peaches and tomatoes; (for refrigerator storage) apples, apricots, cantaloupe, figs, kiwis, honeydew melon and plums. In the refrigerator, store these fruits in a no-vegetables-allowed crisper drawer and away from fruit that doesn't need to be quickly ripened. Some vegetables impart distinctive odors that fruits can absorb, affecting overall quality.
- When a fruit or vegetable becomes properly ripened at room temperature, you can refrigerate it. Cold temperatures can contribute to flavor and moisture loss in some cases.
- Some produce has a *short life span* once ripened. Plan to use short-lived fruits like apricots, blackberries, raspberries and strawberries and vegetables like herbs, sprouts, corn, cucumbers, eggplant, green beans, leafy greens, lima beans, mushrooms, peas and summer squash within a couple of days of purchase, when possible.
- Fresh produce that has a *long life*, and can therefore wait to be consumed until after most other fruits and vegetables, includes fruits like apples, blueberries, grapes and pears and vegetables like beets without top greens, artichokes, cabbage, carrots without top greens, celery, garlic, leeks, onions, parsnips, potatoes and winter squash.
- Consider using bags specifically designed to provide ideal storage conditions for fresh produce while absorbing ethylene gas. However, don't zip-seal fresh produce in regular, air-tight plastic storage bags or containers; this starts the decaying process and promotes bacterial or mold growth.

## 3. Prepare fruits and vegetables cleverly

- Rinse or scrub and use the entire fruit or vegetable when possible, including all edible skins and seeds. Just cut away any bruises and blemishes.
- Have a plan. Then prepare only what you need. Cut select recipes in half, for instance. Or consider how you'll store and re-use leftovers in cuisine.
- If unable to enjoy all fresh produce you have on hand, make your own frozen food. Cut up fruits or cook up vegetables, place in air-tight containers and freeze.
- Be playful when produce is at the end of its edible life:
  - Puree fruits into smoothies; puree vegetables into a pre-prepared hummus
  - Mash fruit to create fresh jam or a pancake topping; finely dice fruit to make a salsa
  - Sauté nearly any veggie and toss with pasta or sprinkle atop cheese pizza
  - Roast vegetables and stuff into a burrito or sandwich wrap.

Finally, compost any leftover scraps of fruits or vegetables. This can be as simple as storing foodscraps in the freezer and then taking them to a local farmers market that collects scraps for composting. If you choose to compost at home, here's a [guide](#).

**The bottom line:** By taking care of produce from purchase to plate, you can make a noticeable difference in the amount of food wasted in your home—and in America.

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<http://homefoodsafety.org/refrigerate/reduce-produce-waste>