Reducing Food Waste and Your Grocery Bill

Would you like to save money on your food bill? Protect natural resources? Improve access to food? You can help meet all three goals by reducing food waste in your home.

Food waste is a big problem. About 90 billion pounds of edible food goes uneaten each year in the United States. That is the weight of 123 Empire State Buildings! This costs most individuals about $370 a year.

The amount of food waste is a growing concern. Wasted food items make up the largest component going into landfills, but many foods tossed out are still safe to eat. Wholesome foods are tossed into landfills instead of feeding people in need. What's more, producing, processing, transporting, preparing, storing, and disposing of discarded food uses resources such as land, water, labor and energy that could be used for other purposes.

Fortunately, there are groups that are making changes to reduce food waste. You can also do your part to cut waste at home as well. Here are some tips.

Plan and save food and money. Plan a weekly menu and make a grocery list with ingredients you need. Begin with looking in your refrigerator. Are there any foods or leftovers that your family should eat before they spoil? Put recipes on your weekly menu that feature leftover foods. You will avoid throwing out those leftovers and get the most for what you paid for them.

Be a smart shopper. Look through grocery ads in the newspaper or on your computer. Loof for foods that are on sale. Once you have developed your grocery list, stick to it so you don't buy any food you won't use. You can also be a smart shopper to prevent food waste. For example, if kiwi is on sale 5 for $1.00. Your initial thought is to buy 5. But then you notice that the kiwi is already ripe, and you remember you have other fresh fruit in the refrigerator that your family needs to eat this week. You choose to buy 2 kiwis rather than 5 and throw out 3 because they spoiled before you could eat them.

Understand food product dating. The dates on food packages can be confusing. Here are two key things to know:

- A "sell-by" date tells the store how long it takes to display the product for sale. You should buy the product before the date expires.
- A "best if used by (or before)" date is recommended for best flavor or quality.

Many people throw out products after the "best if used by" date expires, thinking they are not safe to eat any more. But that isn't necessarily so. Assuming you have stored

foods properly and the "use by" date occurred a relatively short time ago, you can still eat those foods. Learn more about food product dating and safe storage of foods in the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service's Food Product Dating fact sheet.

Get Organized. Foods are less likely to go bad when you eat older items first. Keep your pantry and refrigerator clean and organized, with older items in front and newer ones in back. Label leftovers with content and dates so they can be used within the next few days.

Give leftovers new life. Use them in recipes that. For example, use limp broccoli in a salad or overripe fruit in a smoothie. Try freezing fruits you don't eat right away for use in breads or baked goods.

Try composting. Instead of throwing out food scraps, create a compost bin. If you don't have space, there are places in the area who will take leftover food to compost.

Source: University of Minnesota Extension