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SE Good Food
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cover story

Food waste is a huge cost, not just to your pocket, but also to the environment. There are easy ways to cut down, writes Richard Cornish.

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It was apocalyptic. Flames were leaping as gas escaped through cracks in the earth at an inner-city park that had once been a tip. Recent rain had formed puddles on the earth covering the former tip and bubbles were forming. Curious, I took a lighter to the bubbles and suddenly the ground was alight. Methane. Decades of buried household rubbish, mostly food waste, was decomposing into flammable gas.

"When food is buried in landfill it produces methane, which is 25 times more potent as a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide," says Cassie Duncan of Sustainable Table, a non-profit **group** that uses discussions around food to raise important issues about sustainability. "Food waste in the home is a massive problem."

Duncan cites some alarming statistics. "Annually, Australians throw away over \$8 **billion** dollars worth of food, most of which ends up in landfill," she says. In Sydney alone \$1 **billion** of edible food is thrown away annually, according to the University of Western Sydney, or \$1036 worth of wasted food for every household. Victorians are even more wasteful, with each household wasting about \$2000 worth of food, according to Sustainability Victoria research. Every year in NSW, \$848 **million** of fresh food is thrown out, \$694 **million** of leftovers, \$371 **million** of packaged food, \$231 **million** of drinks, the same in frozen food, and \$180 **million** in takeaway food.

That is simply the dollar value of the food to the end consumer. The net cost to the environment includes fertiliser, fuel for production and transport, plus energy for processing and refrigeration. The hidden cost to the Australian economy is lost potential exports.

According to the UN Food and Agricultural report, "in rich countries ... people simply can afford to waste food", whereas in traditional cultures and poorer communities people **buy** smaller amounts of food that they will cook and eat each day.

"The worst offenders are families with children in households with an income of \$100,000, and young consumers between 18 and 24," Duncan says. "As a nation we throw out one in five bags of groceries, which means that 40 per cent of household rubbish is food."

But there are some simple things we can do to reduce waste and save money.

Jo Sayer is a mother of two living in Elwood, Melbourne. "I thought I was doing the right thing recycling my rubbish and throwing the food waste in the bin, thinking that being biodegradable it would decompose," she says. "I was quite shocked to learn that food in landfill created methane." Sayer was filling a large black garbage sack with non-recyclable rubbish every week. After seeing a video produced

by Sustainable Table called Waste Deep (sustainabletable.org.au), she and her family made a few basic changes to the way they shopped and ate.

"I was buying too much food each week and wasn't using everything," Sayer says. "So I started planning meals and found I was buying less." Managing her leftover food better, storing it properly and using leftovers in other meals also helped reduce waste. She and her husband gave up buying fruit and vegetables at the supermarket, instead shopping at the local farmers' market. "Our fruit and vegetable bill has almost halved," Sayer says.

They now save \$1200 to \$1500 on their annual fruit and vegie bill alone, by planning meals and only buying what they actually need as opposed to creating a surplus of food in the home from which to pick and choose to cook with. This is common household behaviour that leads to the unused part of the surplus being binned.

"It's most important to stop waste at the beginning of the pipeline," says Jade Herriman, research principal at the Institute for Sustainable Futures at University of Technology Sydney. She and her team are working with Sydney Institute of TAFE to educate apprentice chefs in "root to stalk" cooking, a play on nose-to-tail eating, the concept in which every part of an animal is used. An example of this is buying beetroot and cooking the roots while using the leaves in a salad.

"It starts with menu planning, but also knowing what to do with food," she says. "In my grandparents' time, food was so much more costly that food waste just didn't exist," she says. "There is still a moral dimension to wasting food - it's that we have lost or forgotten many traditional food-preserving skills and ways of cooking. We want to bring back those skills such as drying, bottling, preserving and others, not just to save waste, but ultimately produce more creative but also more profitable chefs."

Herriman and her team are taking part in Sydney's Good Food Month with chef Jay Huxley, demonstrating low-waste cookery at Sydney Institute of TAFE on October 28, noon-2pm. (goodfoodmonth.com.au).

The other part of the equation is making better use of unavoidable food waste such as pumpkin peel, teabags and avocado shells. Sayer found a solution by buying a subsidised compost bin through her local council. In it goes all the food waste, including egg shells, bones and citrus peel. "My young daughters call it the 'Green Cone Monster' and love looking into it and watching their scraps transform," Sayer says. Instead of putting a bag in the rubbish each week, now there is just one a month. "We can have it in the kitchen and it doesn't smell, because there is no food in it."

Another method of avoiding food waste involves using animals as living converting units. Our family has developed an integrated waste-management system that sees no organic matter hit the rubbish bin. Our two chickens eat the household scraps, and any hard bits they don't eat are fed to the rabbit. The rabbit, in turn, manures on straw in which worms thrive. The hay and the worms are given to the chickens. The chickens manure the straw that is collected and composted with all the hard and undesirable organics such as pumpkin and potato peel. The compost is spread on to the vegetable garden and around the fruit trees. This happens in a small back garden attached to a single-fronted Victorian terrace house.

For those who don't have space for a compost bin, there are alternatives such as the Bokashi One composting system (bokashi.com.au), an airtight bucket into which scraps are added along with a mix of bacterial cultures that "ferment" the scraps without producing odours. Once broken down, the compost can be used as garden fertiliser. Another option is an upmarket mechanical biodigester called the CLO'ey. It's about the same size as a bar fridge and uses heat, agitation and heat-loving microbes to turn up to four kilograms of kitchen waste into clean, pasteurised garden-friendly compost in 24 hours (closedloop.com.au). Some local councils, such as Sydney's Leichhardt Municipal Council (leichhardt.nsw.gov.au), are beginning to offer food waste collection, where residents of flats place food waste in a container about the size of a **wine** cask, lined with a biodegradable bag made from starch. This goes into the communal bins and is delivered to an electricity plant, where the scraps are digested and turned into gas, which is then burned to generate electricity.

"There is no waste in nature," says Sustainable Table's Cassie Duncan. Her organisation is pushing to help people eliminate food waste through their giveafork.com.au campaign. During October, it is encouraging people to learn how easy it is to stop waste, by throwing a waste-free dinner party. When people sign up for this fund-raiser they receive a free e-book full of ideas and tips such as cooking with potato skins. "With a little imagination you can eliminate most waste, save money and compost what's left to nourish the soil to grow more food," Duncan says. "It's a perfect circle."

Jill Duplex's spoilt tomato sugo

Great for pasta, beans, fish, chicken, anything. Add black olives or dried chilli flakes if you like.

2 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil

2 garlic cloves, finely sliced

8 tomatoes

½ tsp dried oregano

3 anchovy fillets (optional)

1 tbsp salted capers, rinsed

2 tbsp parsley, basil, or whatever soft herbs you have

1. Cut out any severely damaged bits of tomato and discard, then chop the rest. I don't bother peeling or seeding them, but use everything.

2. Heat the olive oil and gently fry the garlic. Add the chopped tomatoes, oregano, anchovy and capers and half a cupful of water, and simmer, stirring occasionally, for 20 minutes until nice and thick. Taste for sea salt and pepper. Chop the parsley or basil, and stir through.

Seven things to do with broccoli stems

1. Peel, cut into quarters lengthwise and use as raw crudite with a creamy dip.

2. Save them to add to other leftover vegetables to turn into vegetable stock.

3. Cook in chicken stock with two chopped potatoes until tender, then whiz into soup.

4. Cut stalks on a diagonal and stir-fry with **Chinese** sausage, soy and hoisin sauce.

5. Pickle sliced stalks in vinegar, salt and sugar, and serve in burgers and salads.

6. Steam until tender and top with a fried egg and grated parmesan.

7. Steam until tender, mash and turn into vegie burgers and fritters.

Carrot-top pesto

In a food processor, pulse 50 grams of baby carrot tops with a handful of rocket, parsley or mint, one grated garlic clove, one tablespoon cashews, two tablespoons grated parmesan, sea salt and pepper until well-chopped. Slowly add 150ml extra-virgin olive oil while pulsing, until just mixed. Serve with roasted baby carrots or in carrot soup.

Oz Harvest

The food-rescue charity Oz Harvest turns 10 this year. To celebrate, they are holding pop-up Table for 10 dinners this week, with key Sydney chefs. See goodfoodmonth.com

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