

FOOD + HOME/FOOD

# The True Cost of Food Waste in Washington

Tips and tricks to reduce food waste and shrink your footprint

BY GEMMA ALEXANDER (/AUTHOR/GEMMA-ALEXANDER) |

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PHOTO: credit: istock/AndreyPopov

Children have always rolled their eyes at exhortations to think of starving children in far-off places and “clean their plates.” Besides being ineffective, the clean-plate approach is no longer encouraged (<https://riseandshine.childrensnational.org/healthy-eating-why-its-time-to-stop-cleaning-your-plate/>) for health reasons. But food waste is not at all healthy for the planet. Wasted food is also wasted money, not to mention how frustrating it is to scrape an entire dinner into the garbage after spending so much time

cooking it. From the fossil fuels generated by growing and shipping the food to the greenhouse gases that rotting food generates in the landfill, the food your family wastes is making a very real contribution to climate change. But your family doesn't have to be part of the problem. Learning how to waste less food is good for your bank balance, your sanity and the climate – and it can even present teaching moments that won't make your kids roll their eyes.

## Compost and climate change

The total environmental impact from growing, producing, transporting, storing and disposing food is called a "foodprint (<https://www.earthday.org/campaign/foodprints-for-future/>).” Our World in Data reports that food production accounts for 26 percent (<https://ourworldindata.org/environmental-impacts-of-food>) of global greenhouse gas emissions, 70 percent of global freshwater use and 78 percent of global water pollution. A lot of that impact is necessary – we have to eat! But according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, about one-third of the world's annual food production (<https://openknowledge.fao.org/items/037d58d7-7f58-49ae-98e5-6fe12b1e2da5>) goes uneaten every year. Tossing those green beans that nobody liked may not seem like a big deal. But when you think of the energy and resources used to bring those beans to the plate being wasted, and then multiply that by all the food we throw out over the course of the year, the amount of waste is mind-boggling. And its environmental impact is significant – wasted food accounts for 8 percent of human global greenhouse gas emissions.



*We can all do our part to help reduce food waste and keep it out of landfills. credit: istock/vchal*

Some waste happens along the supply chain, but the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that Americans waste (<https://earth911.com/home-garden/infographic-us-food-waste/>), about 400 pounds of food per person each year. Most of that wasted food ends up in a landfill, where it slowly decays to form landfill gas (<https://www.epa.gov/lmop/basic-information-about-landfill-gas>), a potent greenhouse gas mixture of methane and carbon dioxide. Fortunately, saving the planet can save you money as well – it’s estimated that the average Washington family of four throws away as much as \$1,500 worth of food a year (<https://www.spokanepublicradio.org/regional-news/2023-04-12/washington-state-officials-highlight-food-waste-this-week>).

## Washington’s waste

Washington just misses out on being among the top five states (<https://shapiroe.com/blog/food-waste-by-state/#Washington>) for reducing organic waste. Washington State Department of Ecology 2015 baseline data (<https://ecology.wa.gov/waste-toxics/reducing-recycling-waste/organics-and-food-waste/sustainable-food-center/use-food-well-washington-plan#:~:text=That's%20nearly%20%24130%20billion%20worth,edible%20food%20going%20into%20landfills.>) indicated that Washington generated approximately 1.2 million tons of food waste annually, with more than 390,063 tons of that being edible food waste. The residential sector generated 37 percent, and the commercial sector generated 60 percent of the wasted food. Unfortunately, those numbers haven’t changed much (<https://myedmondsnews.com/2024/03/use-food-well-new-campaign-seeks-to-reduce-food-waste-in-washington/>) over the past decade. The recently passed Organics Management Law (<https://ecology.wa.gov/waste-toxics/reducing-recycling-waste/organics-and-food-waste/2022-organics-management-law>) – which requires communities to divert organic materials away from landfill disposal and toward food rescue programs and composting facilities – may help nudge the needle in the right direction. Still, it’s better to eat your food than compost it.

## What parents can do

There are plenty of ways to cut down on food waste. But the single most effective strategy for most of us is planning ahead (<https://www.parentmap.com/article/back-to-school-expert-tips-kids/2#pager-content>). Making a meal plan helps you save money at the grocery store (<https://www.parentmap.com/article/clever-ways-save-groceries-reduce-food-waste>) by only buying the right amount, eliminating impulse purchases you won’t have time to fix and helping you get creative with leftovers (<https://earth911.com/inspire/maven-moment-meals-from-rice-and-leftovers/>). Leftovers don’t have to be boring when you combine them into new meals. Planning ahead compounds your efficiency by helping you see ways to “recycle” ingredients, whether that’s realizing that you won’t have time to cook on Thursday or noticing that your Tuesday-night recipe only uses half an onion, so you can plan to use the other half in omelets on the weekend.





*Leftovers make a great lunch and help reduce food waste. credit: istock/fcafotodigital*

We often throw out food that spoiled before we got around to eating it. Proper food storage (<https://earth911.com/home-garden/how-to-store-produce-reduce-food-waste/>) will keep food from expiring before its time. Learn which types of produce should not be stored together (some fruits produce higher levels of ethylene, which will cause other types to ripen and spoil faster) and which fruit belongs in the refrigerator versus the counter or pantry. Keep refrigerated food covered to minimize moisture, as that can lead to mold. (You can save electricity by keeping the refrigerator and freezer about three-quarters full (<https://www.thekitchn.com/one-mindless-kitchen-habit-thats-costing-you-money-22956481>) – and, of course, by teaching people to close the fridge door promptly.) Pickling or freezing (for later use in soups or smoothies) can rescue edible produce that is past its prime.

## **Snack control**

Taking control of snacking can have a big impact on how much food kids waste. Don't let kids snack for an hour or two before dinner. Make sure the food you offer your kids is easy to eat; slicing an apple can make the difference between a child eating a piece of fruit or only two bites of it. When you pack snacks for outings, bring the things you need to use up. Kids are more likely to finish off the last of the crackers or slightly brown bananas when you're out and about and no other snack is available. Even though kids don't

have to clean their plates to be excused from the table, finishing dinner should be a prerequisite to evening snacking. Instead of scraping plates right after dinner, save your child's leftovers until after they've gone to bed. If they come back an hour after dinner asking for a snack, you've got a plate ready for them.



*Slicing up snacks can help reduce food waste. credit: istock/Pruksachat Lapvilai*

Speaking of leftovers, lots of kids seem to believe that serving leftovers is a sign that you don't really love them. This is where a little education can go a long way. Remind kids that reheating leftovers instead of cooking a whole new meal is the reason you had time to watch their soccer game or help them finish their homework. And you can teach them how their leftovers impact the planet – just don't do it while all of you are at the table.

## **Getting kids involved**

Lecturing kids about food waste while they're staring down at a plate of their least favorite dish isn't likely to have any impact at all. Instead, families can read [books about the environment](https://www.parentmap.com/article/activities-and-books-teach-kids-how-help-environment) (<https://www.parentmap.com/article/activities-and-books-teach-kids-how-help-environment>), followed by age-appropriate conversations about climate change and the environment. (Hint: When you're talking about the environment, emphasizing ways that your family can have a positive impact, rather than focusing on "doom and gloom," is most effective.) Then you can gently help your environmentally aware child make the



connection to food waste. Try taking the online [Food Waste Quiz \(https://ivaluefood.com/quiz.php\)](https://ivaluefood.com/quiz.php) together and then tackle a [food waste challenge \(https://challenge.ivaluefood.com/\)](https://challenge.ivaluefood.com/) as a family – be sure there is a good prize (food or otherwise) at the end!

Getting kids excited about eliminating food waste might help them be more open to the idea of eating leftovers and trying new things. But eco-guilt and environmental awareness won't cure a picky eater. As counterintuitive as it may seem, resign yourself to a certain amount of food waste while you commit to expanding your kids' palates with [new foods \(https://www.parentmap.com/article/clever-tools-motivate-picky-eaters\)](https://www.parentmap.com/article/clever-tools-motivate-picky-eaters). Adventurous eaters waste less food in the long run. Even if you don't have time or space for a full vegetable garden, studies have shown that kids are [more likely to eat \(https://www.eatright.org/food/planning/food-security-and-sustainability/kids-in-the-garden-nutritious-and-fun#:~:text=An%20expanding%20body%20of%20research,resourceful%20and%20gain%20self%2Dconfidence\)](https://www.eatright.org/food/planning/food-security-and-sustainability/kids-in-the-garden-nutritious-and-fun#:~:text=An%20expanding%20body%20of%20research,resourceful%20and%20gain%20self%2Dconfidence) and enjoy food they've had a hand in growing and preparing. So pot a few tomato plants and let your kids get involved in the kitchen – especially in helping decide how to use different kinds of ingredients. Even if you have curbside organics recycling, maintaining a small compost pile can teach kids about nutrient cycling and waste.



*Even young children can help prepare their lunch and help reduce food waste. credit: istock/Franci Leoncio*

It's tempting to scold kids for wasting the lunch you packed, but resist the temptation and encourage them to bring home what they don't eat. That way, you can get a better sense of what and how much to pack. And don't try to figure it all out on your own. Just as kids are more likely to eat the tomatoes they planted, they

are more likely to eat the lunch they planned. Get your kids involved in planning and packing their lunch boxes. At home, encourage them to take small portions, and then allow them to have seconds, rather than taking large first servings they may not finish.

The road to sustainability can be a bumpy one, and generating some food waste is inevitable. But shrinking your family's foodprint has real environmental benefits, and it's good for your family's health and budget, too.

# A zero-waste shopping primer

For every potential purchase, you have three chances to eliminate waste.

## 1. Before you buy

Avoiding unnecessary purchases is one of the most effective – and overlooked – ways to reduce waste. Besides resisting impulse purchases, think about renting or borrowing items you won't use often. Access the [King County Library Makerspaces](https://kcls.org/makerspaces/) (<https://kcls.org/makerspaces/>) during independent study time or join a [tool library](https://www.phinneycenter.org/diy-hub/tool-library/) (<https://www.phinneycenter.org/diy-hub/tool-library/>).

## 2. When you buy

Nearly one-third of municipal solid waste (that's garbage) is made up of packaging, so buying in bulk cuts a lot of waste. Bulk buying doesn't mean you have to buy a lot – it just means you're buying by weight or volume using your own containers instead of prepackaged amounts. Farmers markets are the original packaging-free grocery stores. [Mimi's Zero Waste Market](https://mimiszerowastemarket.com/) (<https://mimiszerowastemarket.com/>) in Crown Hill and online takes a waste-free approach to the supermarket, while [Public](https://apublicshop.com/) (<https://apublicshop.com/>) in West Seattle specializes in bulk personal care products.

Buying second hand is another important strategy. [Consignment](https://www.parentmap.com/article/9-consignment-stores-seattle-area-families) (<https://www.parentmap.com/article/9-consignment-stores-seattle-area-families>) and thrift stores often carry brands that would be too expensive to purchase new. As long as the item you're searching for is legal and appropriate for all ages, you can find just about anything on the volunteer-run [Freecycle network](https://www.freecycle.org/) (<https://www.freecycle.org/>), where membership and all available items are free.

## 3. When you dispose

Buying secondhand is a two-way street. Instead of throwing things away, as long as they are still functional, give them a second – or even third – life with someone else. Post your unwanted items for sale on Craigslist or OfferUp. Donate craft and art supplies to [Seattle ReCreative](https://www.seattlerecreative.org/) (<https://www.seattlerecreative.org/>). Building materials reseller [Ballard Reuse](https://ballardreuse.com/) (<https://ballardreuse.com/>) accepts “all kinds of random cool stuff,” from chandeliers to the kitchen sink. Build community while you eliminate waste by hosting a [swap party](https://www.parentmap.com/article/host-swap-party) (<https://www.parentmap.com/article/host-swap-party>) for clothing, toys or sports gear.

Need more zero waste tips and resources? Check out [Zero Waste Washington](https://zerowastewashington.org/local-zero-waste-stores/) (<https://zerowastewashington.org/local-zero-waste-stores/>).



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Seattle-based freelance writer Gemma Alexander focuses on the intersection of parenting and the arts. When she's not writing for "ParentMap," she blogs at [gemmadeealexander.com](https://gemmadeealexander.com) (<https://gemmadeealexander.com/>) and tweets at @gemmadeetweet.

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