

Preventing Food Waste in Uncertain Times

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Along with many other things, food prices are soaring, grocery store procurements are limited, and shelves are bare. Now, it's more important than ever to make the most of the food that's available.

During the Great Depression, people went to extreme measures to prevent food waste, including: saving margarine wrappers to grease pans, retaining liquid from canned vegetables for soups, and creating casseroles from previous meal leftovers. You may not have to go to those extremes, however there are some practical things you can do to prevent food waste.

Plan Ahead

To be honest, I struggle with meal planning because meal planning takes time. However, it is one of the most effective ways to save time and money in the long run. Many free meal plans are available on the internet for varied diets including: Keto, Vegetarian, and Paleo. Some even come with free grocery lists! Since both my husband and I have particular food preferences, I plan my own meals and make my own grocery shopping list. This ensures we are eating food we truly enjoy so eating leftovers isn't painful. Which leads into the next tip...

Make Extra

These days, it's super easy to find recipes where you can automatically change the number of servings. If that option is not available, it's simple to double the recipe. Creating several servings to freeze and eat later makes good use of your time, and assures that extra food is planned and not wasted.

Freezer burn is a death sentence to the flavor of food. Using a vacuum food sealer reduces the chance of freezer burn, thereby prolonging the quality of the food. Recently, I made a batch of mini frittatas, tossed them into a zippered freezer bag, and went about my day. Several days later, I noticed that the frittatas were covered with ice crystals; a sure sign of freezer burn. A few days ago, I made a batch of egg bites, froze them on a cookie sheet, vacuum sealed them and returned them to the freezer. The sealed egg bites stored in the vacuum sealed freezer bags were much more palatable than the frittatas stored in traditional freezer bags. Vacuum sealers are not very expensive and don't take up much room in your kitchen. They pay for themselves in a short time in food savings. If you don't have a vacuum sealer, use a straw to pull out as much air as possible from the baggie before sealing. Air in the container provides a place for the water in the food to evaporate and freeze.

Make Meals Ahead of Time

Like making extra food, make-ahead meals reduce food preparation time, and food waste by preparing food in bulk. There are also many free recipes on the internet for make-ahead meals to freeze and reheat later. When you make meals ahead or make extra food for later, be sure to label the package with the name of the product, packaging date, any additional ingredients needed at the time of preparation, and the method of preparation or reheating. It's also helpful if you list the number of servings on the package.

If you enjoy preserving food by canning and have the equipment, can meals instead of ingredients. There are several tested recipes available for soups and stews that are easy to reheat and won't take up room in your freezer. Use reputable recipes from credible research-based sources; many of which you

can find on your local UC Master Food Preserver website. Keep in mind that these techniques require skill and equipment. However, you can learn these skills by taking classes with your local UC Master Food Preservers.

Take a Class

Your local UC Master Food Preservers are experts at food waste prevention, teaching basic food safety, and food preservation. There are many ways to preserve food. Some of the food preservation skills you might learn are: proper dehydrating, canning, and freezing techniques. These techniques help you get the most bang for your buck at grocery store and help to reduce food waste.

Use Food Scraps

Freeze your vegetable and fruit scraps to make broth and fruit juice jelly or fruit honey. You can also compost your food scraps. If you have chickens, a garden, or a composting worm farm, food scraps can help make the most of your food budget. Chickens will happily eat most any type of unspoiled food. Before giving chickens food scraps, be sure to research the types of food scraps that are safe for chickens. Composting worms will consume food scraps as their main source of food; including spoiled food. Just remember that they cannot digest oils or fats, so be sure to eliminate these from your food scraps before feeding them to your worms. If you have a garden, most plant material, including plant-based food scraps, can be buried in the soil. These materials break down rapidly and provide beautiful and nutritious compost for your garden plants. Check with the UC Master Gardeners for more tips on composting.

Using these simple tips can help prevent food waste, use available food, and stretch your food budget.

UCCE Master Food Preservers are available to answer home food preservation questions; leave a message at (530) 621-5506 or email us at edmp@ucanr.edu. For more information about our program and events, visit our website at <http://ucanr.edu/edmp>. Sign up to receive our eNewsletter at <http://ucanr.org/mfpnews/>. Find us on Facebook, too (UCCE Master Food Preservers of El Dorado County)!