

Trashy Christmas

Tossing out excess food spoils the holidays – and the planet

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A city worker loads a Christmas tree into a garbage truck in Calgary, Alberta, Jan. 6, 2011. The trees are being hauled off for recycling from various tree drop-off locations. (QMI Agency)

Christmas is a time of plenty, but it's also a time of plenty of waste.

Every holiday season we budget for many things, from gifts to food to décor. If we also accounted for garbage, we'd blow that budget.

"It is estimated that the amount of food waste increases by about 25% during the holiday season," said consultant Paul van der Werf.

According to the George Morris Centre, an agri-food think tank, 40% of Canadian food is tossed year after year, worth \$27 billion. And that's not chicken feed; that's feed for the world's poorest.

"Wastage costs everybody in one form or another," says Martin Gooch, director of the Value Chain Management Centre.

"Food waste creates methane - one of the most harmful greenhouse gases. It's 25 times more harmful than CO2. We hear so much about carbon reduction, and so little of methane."

So just because you compost something, it doesn't mean you're not wasting it. The little green bin does not absolve your sins.

During the holidays, we toss out the extra fare we hoarded in fear of stores being closed for – gasp –

"We tend to buy large quantities of food at one time, which if not used in a timely manner, goes bad. Instead, people go to market each day and only buy what they will consume for that day, so there is little waste." – Tristram Stuart, spokesman for World Vision Canada.

Tristram Stuart, an environmental campaigner and author of *Waste: Uncovering the Global Food Scandal*

globalized food market, waste contributes to rising prices and hunger. “When western countries buy in the global market only to then throw it away, we are literally taking food away from the mouths of

It’s not just consumers at fault. Stuart notes enormous amounts of good food are wasted at every stage: farms, factories and grocery stores – and it often goes unnoticed.

Beyond methane’s dangerous effects, there’s the environmental impact from all the resources that go into food – water, land, fertilizer, and transport fuel.

With all the talk toward reduce, reuse, recycle, Gooch finds much of it is just regurgitated. “How many articles about buying local? Talk is cheap. Change in behaviour is hard.”

Simple reductions by one family can make a huge difference when multiplied by millions of families.

Most waste happens incrementally so it’s hard to recognize the size of the problem. You rarely throw potatoes, but you’ll toss a few here or there.

Produce is the most perishable and most squandered. Remember, by the time it’s purchased, especially if it has sat awhile and travelled long distances. “Plan how to buy. Plan how to store. Plan preparation,” says Stuart.

And a best-before date is not a fling-in-the-bin date. “Food on or after its best-before or sell-by date is still safe to eat,” says Stuart. (Check out stilltasty.com for best-until dates.)

It’s not too late to celebrate a happy green year.

REDUCE, REUSE, RECYCLE

Don’t squander Yuletide food; ponder new ways to use it.

Leftovers: Make Christmas Shepherd’s pie. Add extra rice to hot cereal. Toss cukes into leftover pickles.

Freeze: Bread, veggies, fruit, cheese and more will last longer.

Compost can wait: Make moist, healthy cakes. Yams, carrots, spinach, zucchinis, bananas, yogurt, so

Donate: Call Second Harvest or a food bank near you.

Get crafty with those Christmas decorations.

Treecycle: Recycling trees into mulch is much better than disposing in landfills.

Potpourri: Mix pine needles, cinnamon sticks, dried flowers and sniff.

Use a saw: Make Kitty a scratching post, cut garden logs, create coasters with sandpaper and varnish

Clean: Wrapping paper can be used to clean windows – without streaks!

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