

Turning Scraps into Meals: Tackling Food Waste with Creative Recipes and Rescue Programs

By Jackie Ferguson

Have you ever taken brown bananas and turned them into banana bread? That's one of the most common examples in our culture for using food waste at home. We take old squishy bananas that could be destined for the trash can and transform them into something that everybody wants to eat. Less waste, more delicious treats, everyone is happy. However, food waste is a much larger problem than a few squishy bananas on your counter. According to the USDA, food waste is at a staggering 30-40% of the food supplyⁱ. This translates to 30-40% of the food produced within the US being discarded into landfills. With food prices soaring it makes it incomprehensible why we would purchase food to only throw it away. On average, US households throw away \$370 worth of food per person annuallyⁱⁱ. That equates to about \$1500 of trashed food for a family of four per year. This is where "food rescue" at home comes into play. Using food scraps, stale food, or wilted produce to create new dishes keeps more money in our pockets. But it is not only a smart move financially, it's a smart move for the planet as well. Food that is thrown into the trash ends up creating methane in landfills. According to USDA and EPA factsheet, *Food Waste and Methane: What's the Connection?*, "Methane is 28 times more potent than carbon dioxide (CO₂) at trapping heat in the atmosphere and is responsible for approximately 30% of the increase in global temperature since the Industrial Revolution."ⁱⁱⁱ Methane has become such a global problem that the US is now one of 150 countries working to reduce emissions created by humans 30% by the year 2030.

Wasting edible food is bad for our wallets and for the environment, but it also squanders resources that could be used to feed people. When my kids throw out edible food, I often remind them of that. "For this chicken to be on our table, a farmer had to raise that chicken and slaughter it. The meat was cleaned, processed, and packaged. It was shipped to the store where I bought it, drove it home and cooked it. And now it is getting thrown in the trash!" It might be nagging, but it's also a reminder that a lot of time, money, effort, and resources are put into producing food. And when you've put some of that effort in yourself, it stings even more when it is waste. I am not perfect- it's easier to throw away apples that have gone soft, rather than making apple sauce with them. But it's important for us to start this dialogue about food waste to give us pause before throwing food into the trash. What else could that food become? What else could we do with it?

Giving food a new life is nothing new. Our grandparents and great grandparents were likely masters of this skill. In the past when convenience foods were not as readily

available, people knew that they had to use every part of their food. Every fruit and vegetable were used (even the not so pretty ones), dairy was fermented for a longer shelf life, and stale bread became an ingredient, not trash. But as more ready-to-eat foods became available, we became less reliant on ingredients. Since we could reach for a box of premade snacks instead of baking them, tossing the last stale few didn't seem like a big deal. Wilted spinach might get trashed because we can pop into the store to grab more, or even get it delivered easily. For many, food became fast, convenient, and plentiful. So, when it was wasted, it didn't seem like such a big deal. But for others, food was always scarce. It was and is a treasured resource, and food insecurity remains a problem in our community today.

This food waste issue is not just an issue in my kitchen or yours, it is a national issue. In fact, in June 2024, the White House released the first-ever interagency National Strategy for Reducing Food Loss and Waste and Recycling Organics^{iv}. This 42-page document lays out the background and challenges of the food waste problem on a national level, as well as goals and objectives for the future. According to this document, the ultimate goals of the administration are to “prevent the loss and waste of food; increase recycling of food and other organic materials to support a more circular economy for all; reduce GHG emissions; save households and businesses money; and build cleaner, healthier communities.”^v They hope to do this through national consumer education and behavior change campaigns so that citizens like you and me can learn more about why food waste is such a large problem. They also plan to create partnerships to study this problem further in different communities, facilitate and incentivize food donations to improve access to healthy foods, and more. This issue affects citizens around the entire country, as well as our economy and environment.

There are organizations in our community actively fighting against food waste in different ways. One such organization is the Salvation Army who operates a Food Rescue Program in Watertown, every Thursday from 11:30 am -1pm. Nearby stores, such as Sam's Club and Walmart, donate food that can no longer be sold, but is still safe and wholesome. The Central NY Food Bank picks up the food and delivers it to the Salvation Army where it is then handed out to residents. This program has been going on for seven years and has seen a huge increase in need during that time, especially since Covid. Right now, the Food Rescue Program serves about 190 families per week. This Food Rescue program is a fantastic example of reducing food waste and food insecurity at the same time. And what about food that is brought to the rescue program but has gone bad, like rotten fruit? Farmers come and pick it up the next day to compost or feed their animals. It's food rescue in every sense.

Some schools have also started to implement food waste solutions in their cafeterias on much smaller levels with “share tables.” These are designated spots where students can put sealed unopened food that comes with their lunch if they don’t want it, such as applesauce, juice, etc. Other students during the same lunch period are welcome to grab this food to supplement their meals. Less food waste, less hungry kids- it’s a fantastic idea!

But how can we tackle food waste at home? To prevent food waste and save money from the start, shop with a list. Only purchase the food that you have plans for and avoid overbuying. When shopping, we might consider buying locally from farmers. This reduces resources by not shipping food to you, keeps money in our local economy, and supports our local farmers to continue to produce food. To find local farms in Jefferson County, check out the Local Food Guide at www.jcnlocalfoods.org. Once home, eat the more perishable foods first, such as fish, lettuce, and berries. And if you try all these tips and still have excess food, offer to share with neighbors- you might even make a friend in the process.

Now, back to the banana bread. How else can we transform food scraps at home into something our whole family will want to eat? I present a few ideas here, but these ideas are meant to get you thinking creatively about food waste. Build from them in your own kitchen and challenge yourself to use food scraps in a new way. One thing to keep in mind- all these ideas are using food that is still safe to eat. If you have food that is rotten, moldy, or spoiled, it should be disposed of, either in compost or trash. Only consume food that has been stored in proper conditions.

- **Make broth:** When chopping herbs and vegetables for other recipes, collect peels, scraps, and ends in a zip lock bag and freeze. Continue adding to the bag until it is full of frozen scraps. Then dump these into a stockpot with water and use it to make homemade broth. Had a rotisserie chicken for dinner? Add the chicken bones and scraps to the mix to make a delicious chicken broth.
- **Non-dairy banana ice cream:** old bananas don’t only have to become banana bread. Place frozen banana chunks into a food processor or blender and blend until they turn into sweet and creamy non-dairy ice cream. Add a splash of nondairy milk if needed to blend easily.
- **Apple sauce:** Use bruised or slightly soft apples to make homemade applesauce. Peel and chop 5 apples. Add to a medium saucepan with a half cup of water and teaspoon of lemon juice. Bring to a boil, then cover and lower to a simmer for 20 minutes. Use a potato masher to crush the apples, then keep the sauce in your fridge for 3-5 days.

- Greens cubes: Bag of lettuce or spinach starting to go limp in the fridge? Blend it into a puree with a tiny bit of water and freeze it in ice cube trays. Then add a few cubes next time you make a smoothie.
- Salad dressing: Have an almost empty jar of mustard? Use it to shake up salad dressing. Add 1 part vinegar and 3 parts oil straight into the mustard jar and shake it up to make vinaigrette.
- Pesto: Try using the green leafy tops of carrot, celery or radish to make delicious pesto
- Slaw: Peel the tough exterior of broccoli stems, then shred or finely julienne them to make slaw
- Cooking oil: Bacon grease is a delicious and free cooking oil! After making bacon, just pour the grease into a jar to use for cooking. Schmaltz is another cooking oil made from rendering chicken fat scraps.
- Rethink leftovers: Turn leftovers into soups, salads, casseroles, or stir fries. For example, baked chicken with mixed vegetables and rice could be turned into chicken and vegetable fried rice. It could also be added to broth to make a quick chicken soup.

Do you have more ideas on reducing food waste, or does your family have another creative way to use food scraps? I would love to hear how you tackle this issue at home. Email me your ideas at jsf259@cornell.edu.

ⁱ [Why should we care about food waste? | USDA](#)

ⁱⁱ [Why should we care about food waste? | USDA](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [1211C-USDA-Methane-Infographic.pdf](#)

^{iv} [NATIONAL-STRATEGY-FOR-REDUCING-FOOD-LOSS-AND-WASTE-AND-RECYCLING-ORGANICS.pdf](#)

^v [NATIONAL-STRATEGY-FOR-REDUCING-FOOD-LOSS-AND-WASTE-AND-RECYCLING-ORGANICS.pdf](#), page 6