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Food Waste Reduction Program
ReFresh Nebraska

Exploring Food Waste Issues *Winter 2025*

How much food will go to waste this Thanksgiving? About $550 million worth

by: Nate Clark for ReFED

Pretty soon, many of us will be gathered around a Thanksgiving meal with friends and family by our side. An unfortunate truth is that next to the cranberry sauce and stuffing, it might be important to include something you probably wouldn't expect…a waste basket to handle all of the food that will go uneaten this year.

A new analysis by ReFED estimates that across America 320 million pounds of food will be wasted this Thanksgiving, representing $550 million worth of food thrown away in just a single day. At a time when more Americans are facing food insecurity, the amount of discarded food is the equivalent of 267 million meals that could have gone to people in need.

What's behind all this waste?

Part of the "why" behind this waste is simple—according to new NielsenIQ (NIQ) and ReFED survey data1, more than 90% of Thanksgiving hosts intentionally prepare more food than needed for their holiday gathering. And what does that mean? Leftovers. In fact, every single Thanksgiving host surveyed said that they have leftover food after their meal.

Of course, Thanksgiving leftovers are part of the tradition and festivities—many Thanksgiving hosts prepare for leftovers and take actions that help make sure they don't go to waste, including almost half sending guests home with leftover food to eat (45%). They're also making other meals with the leftovers, such as sandwiches and wraps (46%), breakfast or brunch (32%), or new meals like casseroles or soups (31%). Yet 12% of Thanksgiving hosts—responsible for feeding up to 36 million people—do not plan to manage leftovers in any special way. Making matters worse, nearly half of hosts surveyed said they are not concerned about food waste around the holiday. And that means there's a good chance those leftovers are destined for disposal.

What are some of the impacts of this waste?

This year, people's wallets are going to take a big hit from this waste. We're seeing general food price inflation, but in particular, USDA reports wholesale prices for frozen turkeys are 40% higher than in 2024, making it likely that what people pay at the grocery store for this Thanksgiving staple will be elevated. ReFED's analysis indicates that 40% of what gets tossed on Thanksgiving is turkey, equating to a lot of wasted dollars and cents.

The impacts of this wasted Thanksgiving food on the environment are also significant. The emissions associated with food that gets wasted on Thanksgiving are 811,726 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent, which is about the same as driving 190,000 gasoline-powered vehicles for a year. Of those emissions, 4,800 metric tons of methane alone come from sending that food to landfill, which is similar to what's emitted by powering 28,000 homes' electricity for a year. And about 39 billion gallons of water was used to produce the food that will be wasted this Thanksgiving, enough to fill more than 59,000 Olympic-sized swimming pools.

So what can people do to reduce food waste on Thanksgiving (and all year long)?

- Maximize the use of leftovers: Since leftovers are clearly part of Thanksgiving festivities, make a plan to maximize their use. Have to-go containers on hand to send people home with excess food. For those who have a favorite leftover meal, be sure to have the right ingredients to make them. And while everyone loves Thanksgiving leftovers, clear out the freezer so that after a couple of days there is room to freeze what's left.
- Adopt behaviors that save money and reduce waste: According to the NIQ and ReFED survey, many Americans are coping with elevated food prices by adopting meal preparation changes like using leftovers more (45%), being more conscious of using up fresh foods before they go bad (40%), and buying more frozen foods and using only what's needed for a meal (24%). In the grocery store, 48% of U.S. consumers are cutting back on non-essential items. Not only do these behaviors help save money—they can also reduce food waste.
- Consider supporting your local charitable food system: While many food banks and food pantries will not accept your leftovers, consider donating any excess, packaged, and shelf-stable ingredients or making a contribution to a local organization that is providing food to those in need this holiday season.
- Make an effort to keep wasted food out of the landfill: Even after all is said and done, it's likely there will be some food waste. If possible, seek out and find a way to keep that food out of the landfill, whether that's through a community or municipal composting program, or using a backyard compost bin.

Check out this piece for more on the NielsenIQ and ReFED survey. For the food waste news you need to know delivered directly to your inbox, sign up for our mailing list.

ReFresh Recipes

Shopping your fridge first is an important strategy for reducing food waste.
Here's a recipe idea that will help you use what you have before buying more!

Thanksgiving Turkey Sandwich

Serve with extra giblet gravy for dipping.

Basically every single component of a Thanksgiving meal pressed between two slices of sourdough bread and toasted until golden.
We're talking turkey, dressing, cranberry sauce, giblet gravy, the whole nine yards.

USES UP	**MAKES**
Turkey & other Thanksgiving Leftovers	1 Sandwich

INGREDIENTS

- 1 to 2 Tbsp. dijon mustard
- 2 slices sourdough sandwich bread
- 2 slices Swiss cheese
- 1/3 cup shredded leftover roast turkey
- 3 Tbsp. leftover cranberry sauce
- 1/3 cup leftover dressing
- 2 Tbsp. leftover gravy, warmed, plus more for serving
- 2 Tbsp. salted butter, at room temperature

DIRECTIONS

1. Spread the mustard on both slices of the bread, then lay a slice of cheese on each piece. On 1 slice, arrange the turkey and the cranberry sauce. On the other slice, lay on the dressing and spoon the gravy over the top.
2. Carefully unite the 2 halves into 1 sandwich, then spread the top side of the bread with 1 tablespoon of the butter.
3. Heat a grill pan or skillet over medium-low heat. Invert the sandwich, butter-side down, on the pan. Place a heavy-bottomed skillet on top of the sandwich and cook until the bread is crusty and golden, 2 to 3 minutes. Remove the heavy-bottomed skillet and spread the top piece of bread with the remaining 1 tablespoon butter. Flip the sandwich and repeat, pressing with the skillet until the bread is crusty and golden, the fillings are hot, and the cheese is melted, 1 to 2 minutes more.
4. Serve with the warmed gravy for dipping.

BY REE DRUMMOND for The Pioneer Woman

FOOD STORAGE TIPS FROM SAVETHEFOOD.COM

BEANS, NUTS & VEGETARIAN PROTEINS

BEANS, CANNED OR COOKED

REFRIGERATE IT: Yes, after opened or cooked

AT FRESHEST: Can in pantry, several years; cooked beans, refrigerator, 3 to 5 days; freezer, up to 3 months

OPTIMAL STORAGE: Store cooked beans in their cooking liquid or water in an airtight container.

FREEZING: Freeze in sealed airtight containers in their cooking liquid or water.

USE IT UP/REVIVAL: Made too many beans? Cooked beans can also be used in all sorts of recipes, such as cookies and cakes.

BEANS, DRY

REFRIGERATE IT: No

AT FRESHEST: Can last indefinitely, but after 1 year may need slightly longer cooking times

OPTIMAL STORAGE: Store in airtight containers in a cool, dark, dry place. Do not wash until just before use.

FREEZING: Not recommended.

USE IT UP/REVIVAL: If the lengthy preparation time is the reason that bag of beans is hanging around in your pantry, you might like to know that pressure cooking vastly decreases the time to cook beans. Beans soaked for as little as 1 hour will cook in 3 to 14 minutes, depending on their variety, size, and age, using a pressure cooker. If you don't have a pressure cooker, beans can be partially cooked in the microwave to decrease conventional cooking time. Be careful to fully cook red kidney beans, as they can be toxic when undercooked, and do not cook them in a slow cooker unless boiled for at least 10 minutes beforehand. Do not add salt, lemon juice, vinegar, tomatoes, chili sauce, ketchup, molasses, or wine until after the beans are fully cooked, as they can prevent beans from becoming tender. Brown foam in a pot of cooking beans is protein from the beans, not dirt. If you don't like this, simply skim it off or add a bit of butter or oil to the water to prevent foaming.

PEANUTS

REFRIGERATE IT: Recommended

AT FRESHEST: Unopened jar in pantry, 2 years; unopened bag in pantry, 1 to 2 months; refrigerator, 4 to 6 months; freezer, 9 to 12 months. Peanuts in the shell keep longer.

OPTIMAL STORAGE: Store in a cool, dry, dark place in an airtight container. If using only occasionally, it's best to refrigerate or freeze them.

FREEZING: Shell and seal in zip-top freezer bags, or boil whole peanuts in a brine solution, drain, and seal in freezer bags.

USE IT UP/REVIVAL: Peanut soup is a popular African dish. Peanut shells can be used to make finger puppets or ornaments or to replace Styrofoam packing peanuts. However, many folks have allergies to peanuts, so be careful with how you use the shells.

SEEDS

REFRIGERATE IT: Yes, ideally

AT FRESHEST: Sunflower seeds—Raw, at least 1 year at room temperature; roasted, 8 months in refrigerator, 4 months at room temperature

Flaxseeds— Whole, at least 1 year at room temperature; ground, at least 90 days in refrigerator

Pumpkin seeds— Raw, 4 to 6 months in refrigerator

OPTIMAL STORAGE: Make sure the seeds are dry before storing. Store in airtight containers in the refrigerator or at least in a cool, dark, dry place. If using only occasionally, store in the freezer (not necessary for sunflower seeds).

FREEZING: Pack into zip-top freezer bags or airtight containers. USE IT UP/REVIVAL: If seeds are raw, they can likely be sprouted by soaking in water overnight and then leaving in aerated containers and rinsing once a day. If moths have gotten into a container of seeds, discard all the seeds and wash the container well before using again.

Quick Tricks! Brought To You By:

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QUICK TRICKS

Food tossed is money lost. One way to add new life to still edible foods is to re-purpose leftovers and reuse them in new ways and new recipes. This booklet will get you started with simple tips and recipes. You'll find "recycled" can taste just as good, maybe even better than the original recipe.

Alice Henneman, MS, RDN Extension Educator

Makeover your leftovers

VEGETABLES

- Freeze chopped mature onions by adding directly to a freezer bag. Lay flat to freeze. To separate the onions b before use, give bag a slight "whap" on kitchen counter.

- Freeze extra bell peppers in shapes needed for recipes. Freeze for a few hours on a baking sheet with sides until hard. Transfer to a freezer bag.

- Purée extra vegetables in a blender or food processor and heat with pasta sauce. Possible vegetables include carrots, butternut squash, red bell peppers and zucchini.

- Freeze extra tomato paste in tablespoon-size portions in an ice cube tray. Transfer to a freezer bag. Adding a tablespoon or two of tomato paste to soups, casseroles and pasta sauce enhances the flavor of these foods with its concentrated, almost meaty taste.

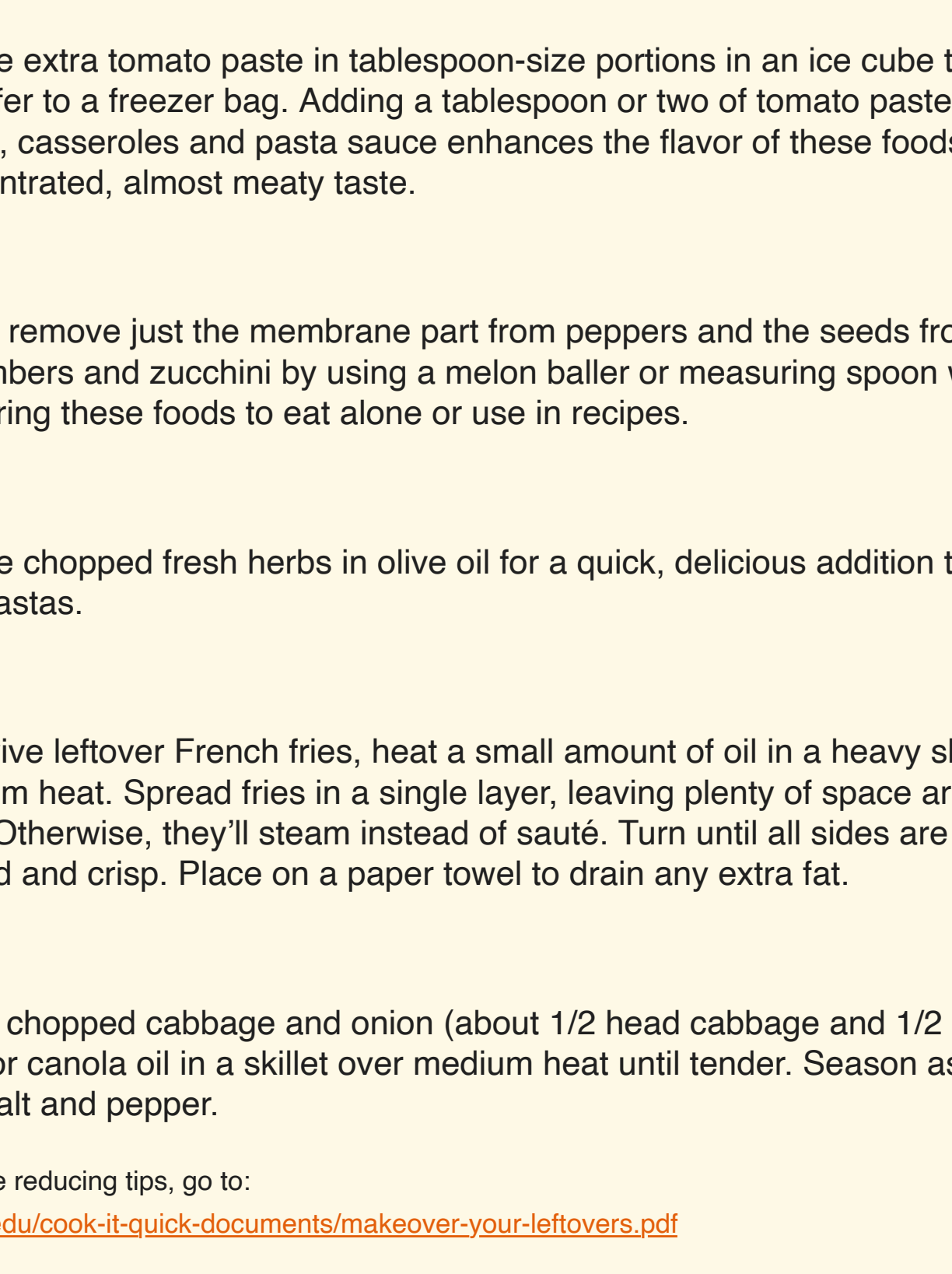
- Easily remove just the membrane part from peppers and the seeds from cucumbers and zucchini by using a melon baller or measuring spoon when preparing these foods to eat alone or use in recipes.

- Freeze chopped fresh herbs in olive oil for a quick, delicious addition to sauces and pastas.

- To revive leftover French fries, heat a small amount of oil in a heavy skillet over medium heat. Spread fries in a single layer, leaving plenty of space around the fries. Otherwise, they'll steam instead of sauté. Turn until all sides are evenly heated and crisp. Place on a paper towel to drain any extra fat.

- Sauté chopped cabbage and onion (about 1/2 head cabbage and 1/2 onion) in olive or canola oil in a skillet over medium heat until tender. Season as desired with salt and pepper.

For more waste reducing tips, go to:
www.food.unl.edu/cook-it-quick-documents/makeover-your-leftovers.pdf



ReFED

Tips to Reduce Wasted Food During the Holidays

Make a difference this Thanksgiving and the entire holiday season by being thoughtful of what you're doing to reduce food waste. Here are a few suggestions we hope you'll incorporate into your planning:

Plan Ahead
Calculate how much you'll need to serve to each person attending and purchase food accordingly. Use a tool like the "Save the Food" Guest-imator to tell you how much to make while accounting for all your side dishes and different appetite levels.

Develop a Leftovers Strategy
Check with your guests beforehand to see if they'd like to take leftovers home with them, and cook to that amount. Make sure you have plenty of containers, aluminum foil, and other storage items to pack everything up.

Clean Out Your Freezer
Clean out your freezer to make room for everything you're saving. Your freezer is a magic "pause" button for your food – if stored in proper containers, you can safely freeze Thanksgiving leftovers for months.

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ReFresh Nebraska is published by:
Keep Nebraska Beautiful
8101 O Street, Suite 114
Lincoln, NE 68510
Telephone: (402) 486-4562
Email: info@knb.org
Web Site: www.knb.org