



A Well Run Kitchen Nearly Eliminates Waste

If you plan food use and storage well, you'll eat better, learn a little chemistry, and have richer soils for your garden.

by Jim Black, for Yakima County Master Gardeners

There are many commercially available compost units that keep waste neat and out of sight, but ready for use if materials are rotated often. If you, like Master Gardener Ana Villasenor, prefer an orderly garden, perhaps a unit like hers, pictured above, would fit your needs. (Inset photo shows the interior where the compost is nearly ready.

ANA VILLASENOR PHOTOS

Although your community may have kitchen waste composting services, most areas in the Yakima Valley do not. No problem! Composting it yourself is simple and you get all of the benefits.

Really, by following a routine, you can save money, and later enjoy nutrient-rich soils for your garden.

First, reducing food waste

Hundreds of dollars are wasted every year in most households when foods are improperly stored. Rather than adding spoiled produce to your garbage, follow these hints:

— Use your refrigerator produce drawers to store most vegetables and some fruits, but do not keep produce in plastic bags unless they are “breathable” bags. Instead stack them loosely in the drawer or place them in paper bags or tubs that allow some air circulation. Air-tight bags or closed “Tupperware” containers actually may speed up the decaying process.

— Wait until you're ready to consume produce to wash it. Again, moisture is the enemy.

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Then on August 15,
Building a High-
Production Composting
Center for Home Use.

— Leave stems on fruit and vegetables to avoid growth of microorganisms where the stem and fruit connect, and buy produce, when possible, that still has the stem attached.

— Eat the ripest produce first and save the least ripe for another day.

Ethylene

Another factor to understand is the affect of ethylene on produce. It's a hormone produced by all fruit and vegetables as they ripen. By storing various fruits together, the ethylene produced by one fruit likely will increase ripening of another. When you want to ripen a pear, for instance, let ethylene help you. Paper bag the unripe pear with a banana, for example, and set the bag on your counter. You'll be ready to serve a perfect pear salad in a day or two. (It's ready to eat when the stem can barely flex the flesh where it's connected to the pear.)

But, excess ethylene also may set off a rapid ripening (or rotting) of produce, rendering fruit spoiled before you've had a chance to serve it. Know how to manage ethylene, and you will have licked some of the biggest food waste problems that face cooks.

Some fruit should not be refrigerated, because it is cold-sensitive. Leave it in a bowl on the kitchen counter. Avocados, bananas, tomatoes, and delicious local nectarines, peaches, pears, and plums even look beautiful on display, but it's likely best to display each fruit separately.

Some vegetables also prefer storage outside of the refrigerator, but find a cool, dark cupboard or root cellar for them. They include garlic, onions, potatoes, and winter squash. They should not be stored together or with any fruit.

If you have two produce drawers in your refrigerator, separate most fruits into one and vegetables into the other (but put the kiwis and ripe bananas in with the vegetables. Again, green bananas should not be refrigerated, but go in the bowl, but ripe ones can go in with the vegetables if you wish to add a couple of days to their usefulness.

Making rich soil

Once you understand how to reduce spoilage, the next step is to properly convert waste—the scraps, peelings, wilting flower arrangements, and even the veggies that made it to the table, but were not eaten—into soil that you'll need

If you're a farmer by nature, like Master Gardener Debra Kroon, you may prefer a homemade composting center that can be as simple as two or three piles of organic matter in different stages of decomposition.

DEBRA KROON PHOTO



for potted plants, raised beds and anything else that needs rich, black soil full of nutrients. It's compost time!

In a study of urban food waste in Vermont, it was discovered that discarded food made up over a quarter of the overall home-garbage content. That state has since mandated severe restrictions on what can be sent to landfills. We can expect that more aggressive recycling laws will be passed here as well (and that's a good thing for future generations.)

If you're successful in preventing most of the spoilage from your kitchen, you'll discover that actual kitchen waste will account for a minor part of your composting materials, but it's an important part, rich in the materials that make great soil. So, make the best of it.

First, you'll need a place to store the rotting produce. Any container that will hold a gallon or so of wet material would likely be adequate for most home kitchens, but attractive units are available with charcoal filters for a modest cost. Just buy one that you won't mind having on your counter. Do avoid wood containers and make sure the lid fits snugly. Odor is seldom an issue, but pesky fruit flies will love a loose lid.

After preparing and serving a meal, deposit in the container peelings, egg shells (crushed), coffee grounds, tea leaves, and any food not eaten that you don't wish to use for future meals. Do not place meats, fish, bones, gravies, or dairy products in the container. They should either be fed to pets or thrown in the trash. And coffee filters take longer to compost than is reasonable unless you can achieve a really hot compost pile.

If you wish and have room, you can freeze the produce waste in your freezer. Freezing will often reduce them in volume. And some composter aficionados will even run

vegetables through their food processors to speed the process. However, that is not necessary to have a successful working compost.

When the container is full, take it out to your compost pile (if you don't have one, it's past time to start one), dump the bucket, bring it back and rinse it out, and you're ready for another week.



For more comprehensive information on reducing waste, kitchen composting, and composting in general, visit one of our websites and click on the links provided:

Reducing food waste, <https://extension.wsu.edu/snohomish/storing-fruits/>

Composting, <https://agrillifeextension.tamu.edu/library/gardening/composting/>