



# MERCY EARTH CHALLENGE

## Food Waste II: Food Dating, Composting

*It is a cruel, unjust and paradoxical reality that, today, there is food for everyone and yet not everyone has access to it, and that in some areas of the world food is wasted, discarded and consumed in excess, or destined for other purposes than nutrition. -- Pope Francis World Food Day Message, October 16, 2019*

We learned last week that 1.3 billion tons of food are lost or wasted globally every year. In the U.S., the Department of Agriculture estimates that 30 percent of the country's food supply falls into those categories.

The question then becomes: where does all that food end up? In the U.S. the answer is disturbingly simple: discarded food is the single largest category of material placed in municipal landfills, according to the Food and Drug Administration.

Not only is that sinful when people are going hungry in the U.S. and around the world, especially at this time of the coronavirus pandemic. It's also contributing to climate change. Organic material in landfills lacks the oxygen to decompose naturally, and so releases the potent greenhouse gas methane. Food waste globally accounts for eight percent of greenhouse gas emissions, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

There are a lot of commonsense ways to reduce all this waste. We will explore in greater depth two of them: being attentive to food product dating and composting.

### Food labeling

Most foods in the U.S. are not required by the federal government to have labels indicating when they should be eaten. But manufacturers often add them to packaging to educate consumers. Too often, though, they just add confusion.

Most "use by" and "best if used by" labels [simply indicate when products will be at their freshest](#). These foods can usually be safely eaten past those dates, according to the US Department of Agriculture. You need to use your sense of sight and smell to determine if something is really spoiled and needs to be thrown away.

## **Composting**

Even after all the careful meal planning, use of leftovers and sharing of food, we're always going to end up with some food waste. This accumulation is likely to be greatest during the harvest season, when fresh fruits and vegetables are most readily available and uneatable scraps are in danger of filling the trash can.

This is when you can consider composting, a method of breaking down food waste into rich material for your garden. You can read or listen to [this 17-minute segment](#) from National Public Radio that offers a comprehensive guide to home composting, including options for apartment dwellers without access to a yard.

If you don't want to bother with composting yourself, a growing number of municipalities are offering curbside compost pickup with the trash and recycling, while others have compost drop-off sites. You can also look into composting pickup services offered by private businesses.