

# Zero Waste Guides

## WASTE-FREE LUNCHES

### WASTED RESOURCES, WASTED MONEY, WASTED NUTRITION

According to the [NRDC](#), food production represents 10 percent of the total US energy budget, uses 50 percent of US land, and accounts for 80 percent of the freshwater we consume--yet, 40 percent of food in the US goes uneaten. Not only is this a huge waste of natural resources, but also a waste of money. Americans throw out the equivalent of \$165 billion each year. Meanwhile, according to the hunger-relief organization [Feeding America](#), in 2013, 49.1 million Americans lived in food insecure households, including 33.3 million adults and 15.8 million children. Food waste is clearly both a problem and opportunity for improving the sustainability of our society.

### IT'S NOT JUST US

In a report released in February 2015, [Waste & Resources Action Programme](#), or WRAP, estimates that "the value of global consumer food waste at more than US\$400 billion per year." The collective challenge of climate change impacts come into play as well, according to WRAP. As wasted food decomposes in landfills, it emits the greenhouse gas, methane. "An astonishing 7% of all global greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs), or 3.3 billion tonnes per year, are due to food waste."

### IT'S NOT JUST FOOD

But food isn't the only thing that's wasted in the typical school lunchroom or company break room. Think of all the disposable napkins, service ware, and packaging that ends up in the trash bin and eventually the landfill. [EPA's 2012 Municipal Solid Waste \(MSW\) fact sheet](#) states: "After MSW recovery through recycling and composting, 164 million tons of MSW were discarded in 2012. Food waste is the largest component of discards at 21 percent. Plastics comprise about 18 percent; paper and paperboard make up almost 15 percent." Food, plastic, and paper—all of which might be discards from your lunch.

### WHAT CAN I DO?

Waste generation is a huge problem, but we all have the power to help prevent and reduce it by making simple changes in our individual decisions. Use the tips on the back of this sheet to start packing waste free lunches and do your small part every day to save our valuable resources.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Over a ton of natural resources are conserved for every ton of glass recycled, including 1,300 pounds of sand, 410 pounds of soda ash, 380 pounds of limestone, and 160 pounds of feldspar. [-Keep America Beautiful](#)

Recycling one aluminum can saves enough energy to run your television for three hours. [-Keep America Beautiful](#)

In 2012 in the United States, the category of plastics which includes bags, sacks, and wraps was recycled at about 12 percent. [-US EPA](#)

## COMPARING COSTS

### 'Disposable' Lunch Costs

\$4.02	Per day
\$20.10	Per week
\$723.60	Per year

### 'Waste-free' Lunch Costs

\$2.65	Per day
\$13.25	Per week
\$477.00	Per year

Estimates courtesy of [www.wastefreelunches.org](http://www.wastefreelunches.org), based upon hypothetical lunch contents in disposable and waste-free versions.



### Resources for Further Information

- Waste free lunch letter to parents (Writable PDF): <http://www.epa.gov/osw/education/pdfs/wflwrite.pdf>
- Cornell Composting in Schools: <http://compost.css.cornell.edu/schools.html>
- Composting in your area: [Findacomposter.com](http://findacomposter.com)
- Composting for the Homeowner: <http://web.extension.illinois.edu/homecompost/intro.cfm>
- The Adventures of Herman (vermicomposting): <http://urbanext.illinois.edu/worms/>



Photo courtesy of [laptoplunches.com](http://laptoplunches.com)

## THE FOOD

Food is the most important ingredient in your lunch; consider its role in waste reduction. Carry leftovers home to eat later, and compost inedible bits, at your lunch site (if that service is available there) or at home.



If you're a parent, get input from kids on their food preferences, and consider presentation when packing their lunches. Children are more likely to eat cut up fruits and vegetables. Consider food production and transportation. [Local Harvest](#) and [Sustainable Table](#) can help you find local food and farmer's markets, and explore the issues surrounding food production and shipping. Gardening can help provide sustainable local food, give kids a sense of connection, and provide a use for food-scrap compost.

## WASTE FREE LUNCH TIPS

### THE GEAR

Ditch disposables—choose reusables. Cloth napkins, durable silverware, refillable drink bottles, insulated vacuum flasks, and reusable containers in a reusable lunch bag or box will help eliminate paper, plastic, and packaging waste. If you use plastic baggies, bring them home to wash and reuse; you'd be surprised at how long they'll last. Reusable sandwich/treat bags or combination wrap/placemats are available made from fabric, silicone, or durable plastic. Instead of paper napkins, you might sew cloth napkins from old sheets or clothes, use cotton washcloths, or give new life to vintage handkerchiefs. Recycle aluminum cans, glass bottles, and other items; if your school or workplace doesn't have a recycling program, carry the empties back home. Check with your city's public works division or [www.earth911.com](http://www.earth911.com) to find information on local recycling options. If your school or workplace doesn't have a recycling program, help get one started. If unavoidable, hard-to-recycle packaging might become a fundraising opportunity through programs like [Terracycle](#).



GET THE ABOVE POSTER & OTHER RESOURCES FOR YOUR SCHOOL AT <http://www.epa.gov/osw/education/lunch.html>

### THE PROCESS

Convenience is important in busy households, but a key to eliminating packaging waste is to buy fresh produce and food in bulk, rather than individually-wrapped single servings. Such items are convenient, but unless their packaging is recyclable—and recycled—then waste will be the price of convenience. Buying in bulk can also save you money. Plan a time to separate larger quantities of food into small reusable containers, right after grocery shopping, on a weekend, or early in the week, so you can easily pop your pre-divided portions into your household's lunch boxes daily. For example, you might divide a large salad made with fresh greens it into several lunch-box-sized containers. That saves time when you're assembling lunches. Prepare as much as you can for lunches the night before, even putting a clean cloth napkin or reusable fork or spoon in your bag for the next day. Creating this habit of "preparing ahead" will also encourage you to consider what leftovers from meals could make great lunch material during the week. You might even consider planning meals for the week, with reuse of leftovers for lunches in mind.