MY ZERO WASTE KITCHEN

HOLISTIC LIVING · CLEAN COOKING

The Zero-Waste Kitchen *Starter* Guide

Where kitchen waste really comes from, what to change first, and how to start with the things you already own.

The why
Where household waste actually happens

Five first swaps
Habits that cost nothing to start

Storage basics
The safety numbers worth knowing

Myths to skip
What not to do on day one

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PART ONE · THE WHY

Most waste is food we meant to eat.

When people picture a zero-waste kitchen, they picture packaging. Packaging matters. But the bigger leak in most homes is quieter: groceries that go soft, leftovers that get pushed to the back, and things tossed because of a date on the lid.

30–40%

of the U.S. food supply is wasted

That's USDA's estimate. At the retail and consumer level alone, it was about 133 billion pounds of food in 2010.

31.9%

of food a household acquires goes uneaten

A Penn State model built on USDA household survey data. The researchers are clear it's an estimate, not a trash count.

24%

of what U.S. landfills take in is food

Food is the single most common material landfilled, according to EPA's 2021 farm-to-kitchen report.

96%

of households' wasted food was thrown away

In 2019 it ended up in landfills, combustion facilities or down the drain, per EPA. Very little was composted or put to use.

Why it happens at home

- **We buy or cook more than we need** and throw out the extras. USDA names this directly.
- **Fresh food is fragile.** Penn State found households eating more fresh produce wasted more. That's not a reason to eat less produce. It's a reason to store it well and plan for it.
- **Package sizes don't fit small households.** A whole head of cauliflower is a lot for one or two people.
- **Date labels confuse us.** USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service lists date confusion as one cause of waste. Page 6 sorts it out.

The encouraging part: in the same Penn State study, households that shopped with a list wasted less. The researchers concluded that planning and food management influence how much gets wasted. That's a habit, not a purchase.

PART TWO · THE PRINCIPLE

Use what you have first.

If you only keep one idea from this guide, keep this one. It applies to the food in your fridge and to the stuff in your cabinets, and it's free.

For food

- Check the fridge, freezer and pantry before you shop. EPA puts this first on its list of ways to prevent waste at home.
- Cook the open things first: the half jar of salsa, the last two carrots, the rice from Tuesday.
- Give one dinner a week the job of using things up. Soup, fried rice, frittata and tacos forgive almost anything.
- Plan to eat the leftovers before you make more.

For stuff

- The jars, tubs and lidded containers you already have are your starter kit. Mismatched is fine.
- Finish the roll of plastic wrap or the box of zip bags before switching. Then wash and reuse the bags that are still sound.
- Old towels and t-shirts make good kitchen cloths.
- Buy something new only when you hit a real gap you've noticed more than once.

The order that matters

EPA ranks what to do with food from most to least preferred. In its words, "preventing food from going to waste in the first place is the most environmentally beneficial option," because the resources used to grow, ship and cook that food are wasted too.

1 · Prevent it
Buy what you'll use, store it well, eat it. This is where most of your effort should go.

2 · Repurpose or share it
Scraps into broth, stale bread into crumbs, extras to a neighbor.

3 · Compost it
For what you truly can't eat. Better than the trash, but still the middle of the list.

No guilt, just order. You'll still toss things. Everyone does. The goal is that less of it is food you paid for and meant to eat, and that the rest goes somewhere better than the landfill when you can manage it.

Read more: **The Clean Pantry Reset** at myzerowastekitchen.com/zero-waste-pantry-reset/

PART THREE · WHAT TO CHANGE FIRST

The five swaps I'd start with.

These are habit swaps, not shopping trips. Each one goes after food waste, the biggest leak, and each one works with what's already in your kitchen.

SWAP 1

Shopping from memory → shopping from the fridge

Look in the fridge, freezer and pantry, then write the list. EPA suggests noting how many meals each item covers. **Why first:** list-makers wasted less in the Penn State study.

SWAP 2

The back of the fridge → an "Eat First" shelf

Clear one spot at eye level for anything open, ripe or nearly done. Look there first when you're hungry. **Why:** most forgotten food is food you couldn't see.

SWAP 3

Freezing on day six → freezing on day two

If you won't eat it in time, freeze it while it's still good, labeled with what it is and the date (EPA). Frozen fruit and vegetables keep their best quality for 8 to 12 months at 0°F (NCHFP).

SWAP 4

Disposables → the containers and cloths you own

Store leftovers in tight, lidded containers (FDA's advice) instead of wrap. Use rags for spills and save paper towels for the truly gross jobs.

SWAP 5

Straight to the trash → a scrap bag first

Onion ends, carrot peels and herb stems go in a freezer bag for broth. What's left can go to compost if you have it. **Recipes:** myzerowastekitchen.com/root-to-stem-recipes-kitchen-waste/

One at a time. Pick one swap this week. Add the next when the first one feels automatic. Trying all five on a Monday is how good intentions end up in the back of the fridge too.

PART FOUR · ONE AFTERNOON, NO SHOPPING

The shopping-free starter checklist

Everything here uses what you already own. Do it in one sitting or spread it over a weekend. Check off what you finish and skip what doesn't fit your home.

In the fridge & freezer

- [ ] Pull everything open to the front
- [ ] Clear one eye-level spot for Eat First
- [ ] Plan one meal from what's already open
- [ ] Move apples and bananas away from other produce (EPA: they release ethylene)
- [ ] Leafy greens into the high-humidity drawer; fruit into the low-humidity drawer (EPA)
- [ ] Leave berries and grapes unwashed until you eat them (EPA)
- [ ] Move eggs off the door and onto a shelf, in their carton (FDA)
- [ ] Tape a paper list of what's in the freezer to its door
- [ ] Keep a marker by the fridge for dating containers

In the cabinets & at the sink

- [ ] Gather every jar and lidded container; match lids
- [ ] Set aside orphans to use for scraps or dry goods
- [ ] Start a broth scrap bag in a bag or tub you own
- [ ] Cut an old towel or t-shirt into cleaning cloths
- [ ] Pick a spot by the sink for used cloths
- [ ] Find your city's recycling list and save it to your phone
- [ ] Bag up plastic film for a store drop-off, not the bin (EPA)
- [ ] Read the date on three items: quality date or safety date? (page 6)
- [ ] Write next week's list after checking all three spaces

WHAT I FOUND THAT I'D FORGOTTEN I HAD

THE ONE SWAP FROM PAGE 4 I'M STARTING THIS WEEK

Ready for more structure? The free 7-Day Kitchen Reset Kit turns this into one small task a day, with a waste log, fridge labels and a scrap map. Details on page 8.

PART FIVE · KEEP IT GOOD LONGER

The storage numbers to know

Wasting less should never mean eating food that isn't safe. These are the numbers from USDA, FDA and the National Center for Home Food Preservation.

WHAT	THE NUMBER	SOURCE
Refrigerator	40°F or below	FDA
Freezer	0°F	FDA; NCHFP (best quality)
Perishables at room temp	2 hours max; 1 hour above 90°F	FDA; USDA FSIS
Leftovers in the fridge	3 to 4 days	USDA FSIS
Leftovers in the freezer	3 to 4 months for quality	USDA FSIS
Reheating leftovers	165°F on a food thermometer	USDA FSIS
Frozen fruit & vegetables	8 to 12 months at 0°F	NCHFP
Frozen ground meat	3 to 4 months at 0°F	NCHFP

Where things go

- Raw meat, poultry and fish on the lower shelves (EPA).
- Eggs in their carton on a shelf, not the warmer door (FDA).
- Don't pack the fridge or freezer so tight air can't circulate (FDA).
- Cool big batches in shallow containers so they chill fast (FSIS).
- Frozen food past those times is still safe, just lower in quality (NCHFP; FSIS).

Reading date labels

- **Best if Used By:** best flavor or quality. Not a purchase or safety date.
- **Sell-By:** tells the store how long to display it.
- **Use-By:** last date for peak quality. A safety date only on infant formula.
- Except for infant formula, dates aren't federally required. Food showing no signs of spoilage should be wholesome after the date (all USDA FSIS).

Dates don't override your senses or the clock. Anything that smells off, shows mold, or sat out past the 2-hour rule goes, whatever the label says. For a specific food, look it up in the FoodKeeper app, built by USDA FSIS with Cornell University and the Food Marketing Institute.

PART SIX · WHAT NOT TO DO

Six beginner moves that backfire

Each of these sounds like progress. Most of them create more waste, cost money, or both.

MYTH
"Toss it all in recycling and let them sort it out."

Instead: check what your local program takes. Plastic bags and film can't go in household bins (stores often take them), and containers with food stuck on can't be recycled. EPA says "spatula-clean" is clean enough.

MYTH
"Step one is a matching set of glass jars."

Instead: start with the jars and containers you have. Buying a whole new set to look the part is shopping, not waste reduction. Fill real gaps later, one at a time.

MYTH
"Past the date means it goes in the trash."

Instead: most dates are about quality, not safety. USDA FSIS says food without signs of spoilage should be wholesome after the date. Infant formula is the exception.

MYTH
"If I compost, the waste doesn't count."

Instead: composting beats the landfill, but EPA ranks it in the middle. Preventing waste comes first. Compost what you truly can't eat. Small space? See myzerowastekitchen.com/bokashi-composting-small-kitchens-guide/

MYTH
"Throw out every plastic container today."

Instead: tossing things that still work just moves them to the landfill sooner. Use them up, and replace them with something better as they wear out.

MYTH
"Vinegar disinfects, so I'll mix it into my bleach spray."

Instead: vinegar isn't registered with the EPA as a disinfectant (NMSU Extension). **Never mix bleach with vinegar** (it releases chlorine gas) **or with ammonia** (it makes toxic chloramines), per the Washington State Department of Health.

Simple cleaners, with the safety notes: myzerowastekitchen.com/homemade-kitchen-cleaners-diy/

You know the why.
Now give it one week.

The 7-Day Kitchen Reset Kit is the hands-on next step: one 10 to 20 minute task a day, a waste log that shows where your kitchen leaks, fridge labels and a scrap map.

Get the Reset Kit

Free for subscribers at myzerowastekitchen.com/subscribe-to-our-newsletter-and-exclusive-guides/

Every Sunday

One practical, sourced post in your inbox: storage, scrap recipes and plastic-free swaps.

Read next

Freezer setup: myzerowastekitchen.com/zero-waste-freezer-blueprint/ · Scraps: myzerowastekitchen.com/root-to-stem-recipes-kitchen-waste/

Sources

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This guide is general guidance, not medical, nutrition or food-safety advice. Follow local recycling and composting rules and standard food-safety practice. © 2026 My Zero Waste Kitchen, a Dan Duda Ventures company.