

Happy Earth, Happy You

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Learning Objective

The objective of this blog is to describe sustainable food practices that lead to a healthier planet which in turn lead to healthier lives.

From the farm to the lunchbox, every bite we take is part of a much larger story that connects the health of all of us to the health of our planet. When we understand where our food comes from, how it's grown and managed, and how to properly discard it we can embrace more sustainable food practices. Not only is this important for the present, but this will also have lasting impacts on generations to come. Each of us has a unique opportunity to develop habits that will help us become more mindful consumers and good stewards of the environment.

CHOOSING LOCALLY GROWN FOODS

One of the most effective ways to support sustainable food practices is by choosing locally grown foods. Foods such as fruits, vegetables, dairy, and meat from local farms provide a greater abundance of nutrients with less time between harvest and distribution.¹ Additionally, purchasing locally cuts down on fuel consumption and emissions. This means the carbon footprint associated with long-distance food transportation is reduced.

Shopping at farmers' markets or subscribing to community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs can be an excellent introduction to choosing seasonally grown products and supporting local economies. If you are interested in finding out more about farmers' markets in your area, visit the USDA's Local Food Directories page.² Teaching ourselves and our children to ask about where food comes from fosters curiosity and appreciation for the work that goes into growing the food they eat. Choosing to support local keeps communities thriving economically and agriculturally.



REDUCING FOOD WASTE THROUGH SMART PRACTICES

Excessive food waste, or food that could have otherwise been eaten but was thrown away, is a significant issue. It is estimated that roughly 30-40% of the food supply is considered food waste.³ When we waste food, we're also wasting the resources that went into producing it, including water, energy, and labor. Fortunately, there are simple ways we can reduce food waste at home and in schools.

Being mindful of portion sizes helps reduce food waste by preventing over-serving, which makes it more likely that meals are finished instead of thrown away. Additionally, it encourages smarter meal planning by ensuring you buy and/or cook only what you need before it expires. Composting is another smart way to reduce food waste because it turns scraps into nutrient-rich soil instead of sending them to landfills. Compostable material such as fruit and vegetable scraps or peels, coffee grounds, eggshells, and tea bags can enrich home or school gardens and contribute to a healthier growing environment for plants. Families can compost at home using an outdoor bin or pile. Using a good mix of "green" and "brown" food items, eventually the compost will break down into a crumbly soil that can be used in gardens, plants, and lawns. By being more mindful in reducing food waste, families can significantly play a role in preserving resources and support a more sustainable environment.

CONSIDER MEAL COMPOSITION AND STORAGE

Another way to cultivate sustainability is to consider and appreciate the opportunity of plant-based meals. Plant-based foods typically require fewer natural resources, such as water and land, and produce lower greenhouse gas emissions compared to meat production. That said, meat production also plays an essential role in our agricultural system, providing vital nutrients and supporting many local economies. The key is to make informed choices. Try selecting sustainably raised meats from farms that prioritize ethical treatment of animals and environmentally friendly practices. When purchasing meat, look for labels such as "grass-fed," "pasture-raised," or "certified humane" to ensure that the food aligns with sustainable practices.

Sustainable food storage options help to reduce waste and minimize the environmental impact by using reusable and eco-friendly materials. Glass containers, stainless steel tins, and silicone bags are great reusable alternatives compared to single-use plastic. By choosing sustainable storage methods, households can cut down on plastic waste and keep food fresh for longer periods of time.

Sustainable food practices connect the health of individuals to the well-being of the planet, offering long-term benefits for years to come. Supporting local agriculture, reducing food waste, and making mindful food choices are just some of the ways we can all contribute to a healthier planet.



FAMILY ACTIVITIES

Spend a Saturday morning at your local farmers' market. Bonus points, if you meal plan the week ahead of time and choose food items you will need in your recipes! Need to find your local farmers market? Check out the USDA's farmers' market directory and search your local area.

Site: www.ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/farmersmarkets



BUILD YOUR OWN BACKYARD COMPOST

Steps for Backyard Composting⁴

1. Determine how you will collect and store your browns and greens.

Collect and store your fruit and vegetable scraps in a closed container on your kitchen counter, under your sink, or in your fridge or freezer. For browns, set aside an area outside to store your steady supply of leaves, twigs, or other carbon-rich material (to mix with your food scraps).

2. Set aside space for your compost pile and build or buy a bin.

Choose a space in your yard for your compost pile that is easily accessible year-round and has good drainage. Avoid placing it right up against a fence and ensure there is a water source nearby. Your compost pile will break down in sun or shade. Next, choose a type of bin for your pile. Bins can be constructed from materials such as wire, wood, and cinder blocks. They can also be enclosed and include barrels and tumblers.

3. Prepare your ingredients for composting.

Before adding your browns and greens to the pile, try to chop and break them up into smaller pieces (e.g., corn cobs, broccoli stalks, and other tough food scraps). Doing so will help the materials in the pile break down faster.

4. How to build your compost pile.

Start your pile with a four- to six-inch layer of bulky browns such as twigs and wood chips. This layer absorbs extra liquids, elevates your pile and allows air to circulate at the base of the pile. Then layer your greens and browns like lasagna. If needed, add a little water to dampen the pile.

Having the right proportions of ingredients in your compost pile will provide the composting microorganisms the carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, and moisture they need to break down the materials into finished compost.

When adding browns and greens to your pile, add at least two to three times the volume of browns (such as dry leaves) to the volume of greens (such as food scraps). Always ensure your food scraps are covered by four to eight inches of dry leaves or other browns.

Air and water are the other key ingredients in your pile. To ensure air circulation, add enough browns and turn your compost occasionally. To maintain moisture in your pile, ensure your combined materials have the consistency of a wrung-out sponge.



5. Maintain your compost pile.

As the materials in your compost pile begin to decompose, the temperature of the pile will initially begin to rise, especially in the center. A backyard pile, if well maintained, can reach temperatures of 130° to 160° F. High temperatures help reduce the presence of pathogens and weed seeds.

Turning and mixing your pile from time to time will help speed up the decomposition process and aerate the pile. Use a garden fork to turn the outside of the pile inward.

Monitor your pile for moisture, odor, and temperature and make adjustments as needed.

- a. If the pile is too dry, activity in the pile will slow or cease. Moisten the pile and turn it. (Refer to the note above about maintaining moisture in your pile.)
- b. If the pile has a bad odor, it may be too wet or need more air circulation. Add more browns/dry material to the pile and turn the pile.
- c. If the pile is not heating up, mix in greens and turn the pile.

6. Harvest your finished compost.

When your compost pile is no longer heating up after mixing, and when there are no visible food scraps, allow your pile to cure, or finish, for at least four weeks. You can relocate the oldest compost at the bottom of the pile to a separate area to cure or stop adding materials to your pile. After curing, your pile will shrink to about one-third of its original size.

Compost in a well-maintained pile will be finished and ready for use in about three to five months. Left untended, a pile may take a year to decompose. The compost will look dark, loose, and crumbly and smell like fresh soil. Most, if not all, of the materials that went into the compost pile should be decomposed.

Screen or sift your finished compost to filter out materials that didn't break down – twigs, fruit pits, eggshells, and items like produce stickers and plastic. (You can make a homemade screener out of ¼ inch hardware cloth.) Pits, eggshells, etc. that you sifted out can be added back into the active pile or to a new pile.





DIRT DESSERT RECIPE

- ½ C Chocolate Pudding
- 2-3 finely crushed Oreos
- 2-3 gummy worms

Instructions: Place chocolate pudding in preferred container (bonus points if it is reusable!), finely crush Oreos and sprinkle on top of pudding, top Oreos with gummy worms, & enjoy!



SEASIDE TREAT RECIPE

- ½ C Vanilla Yogurt
- 1 Graham Cracker
- 2-3 Swedish Fish Candy

Instructions: Place vanilla pudding in preferred container (bonus points if it is reusable!), finely crush graham cracker and sprinkle on top of vanilla pudding, top graham crackers with Swedish Fish candy, & enjoy!



REFERENCES

1. [7 benefits of eating local foods - Community Food Systems](#)
2. [Local Food Directories: National Farmers Market Directory | Agricultural Marketing Service](#)
3. [Food Waste FAQs | Home](#)
4. [Composting At Home | US EPA](#)