

Recycling Online



Municipal food scrap recovery has grown significantly over the last 10 years as it's become clear a significant percentage of municipal waste is food discards (21 percent in 2013). Concerns have also grown over the contribution of landfilled food waste to greenhouse gas generation, especially methane.

However, according to reports from organizations like the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), most of our nation's food waste occurs before food ever reaches retailers and consumers. Some of this waste is unavoidable due to the perishable nature of food products and factors like weather disasters.

But much food also goes to waste because it doesn't meet visual inspection in the retail and food-service segments. So-called "ugly" fruits and vegetables are being disposed of over fears that they won't get purchased, but a number of efforts are now being made to stem this tide.

Edible but not acceptable

Recent reports from NRDC and USDA mention, though don't quantify in annual terms, how cosmetic and sizing standards for produce in the retail environment contribute to on-farm or post-harvest food waste losses. In addition, a number of news and video presentations document how these realities are playing out.

A June 2015 PBS "News Hour" segment, for instance, shows examples of produce grown on California farms that is rejected by buyers due to minor color or sizing deviations. Because of cost, this rejected produce is often disposed or tilled

When ugly is beautiful (to eat)

by Roger Guttentag

back into the soil rather than donated to food pantries.

Another video, from September 2015, by SBS2Australia provides an overview of a similar food waste issue caused by food retailing standards. According to this news story, approximately 25 percent of food grown in Australia is not marketed, often due to its failure to meet retailer quality standards, even when it is fit for human consumption.

Finally, in 2014 National Geographic Live published the video "Tristram Stuart: The beauty of ugly food," which provides examples of how cosmetic food standards adopted by European Union food retailers have led to food wastage. Examples include trimming 30 percent off Kenyan green beans to fit into a specific display package and rejecting Ecuadoran bananas that did not have a consistent curvature.

Celebrating imperfection

It's only been recently that the wasted food issue has gained significant public awareness and calls for action from activist campaigns, often harnessing social media platforms. One of the most well-known of these promotions is the Ugly Fruit and Veg Campaign that was started in late 2014 by Jordan Figueiredo, a solid waste specialist with the Castro Valley Sanitation District (in California's Alameda County). Information about this campaign along with social links to Facebook, Instagram and Twitter can be found on the endfoodwaste.org site.

End Food Waste offers a number of helpful links and resources, including a directory of food retailers in the U.S. and other countries that sell imperfect produce as well as food rescue organizations that collect unmarketable produce for donation to food banks.

Individuals can also support the efforts to persuade food retailers to consider marketing produce that is not cosmetically perfect by signing the current petition to Walmart on change.org that replicates the drive that successfully motivated Whole

Foods to begin testing consumer receptivity to imperfect produce and its impact on overall produce sales.

Ugly can mean business

While many food retailers may look askance at imperfect produce, some entrepreneurs and established companies are starting to see these food items as a source of profitability. These business strategies are based on the idea that shoppers will accept odd-looking (but otherwise perfectly edible) produce if it is offered at discounted prices.

Two new companies founded on this idea are Cerplus and Imperfect Produce, both located in the San Francisco Bay region. Cerplus is a web-based market that arranges transactions between food-service companies and growers with surplus or imperfect produce. Farmers list their offers, and interested buyers can complete transactions online. Cerplus handles product deliveries and payments to sellers.

Imperfect Produce, on the other hand, serves consumers directly. Shoppers can select whether they want to pick up boxes of produce or have them delivered, and they can also choose produce preferences (fruits or vegetables only or both) and whether they want organic sourcing. The type of produce that is provided depends on seasonal and production availability.

Meanwhile, France's third-largest supermarket chain, Intermarche, started its Inglorious Fruits and Vegetable marketing program as an experiment in 2014 in a single store located outside of Paris. The buyer response to the experiment was so positive that Intermarche repeated the same program at all of its 1,800 stores. The company created a series of fun videos about the program that illustrate how creative marketing can be used to burnish the public image of less-than-perfect produce.

According to information provided by Intermarche and Cerplus, their programs offer produce that is 30 to 50 percent cheaper than what shoppers would find in conventional outlets.

However, supermarkets are not the

only companies that can re-evaluate their attitudes toward imperfect food. The food-service companies Compass Group USA and Bon Appetit have modified their food purchasing practices through a program called Imperfectly Delicious to include the use of imperfect produce in the production of meals.

Final thoughts

This food waste issue shows there can often be a gap between what consumers want and what businesses think consumers want. A certain segment of the consumer population may in fact desire perfect produce, but the examples above show there are plenty of consumers who are quite willing to buy at a discount. Some retailers may be concerned that the cheaper ugly produce will cannibalize sales from their higher margin perfect produce, but the initial experience of food retailers, particularly in Europe, doesn't seem to bear this out so far.

Furthermore, as many foodies will tell you, produce that's bred to look unblemished is often not the best tasting.

A more trenchant concern voiced about the entry of imperfect produce into retail channels is that the food wastage is just being shifted from farm production to retailers and consumers. Such a risk remains

Web Address Directory

Bon Appetit – Imperfectly Delicious Produce	tinyurl.com/RR-BonAppetit
Cerplus	getcerplus.com
End Food Waste	endfoodwaste.org
Imperfect Produce	imperfectproduce.com
National Geographic – “How ‘ugly’ fruits and vegetables can help solve world hunger”	tinyurl.com/RR-NatlGeo
Natural Resources Defense Council – 2012 food waste report	tinyurl.com/RR-NRDC
NPR’s The Salt blog – “In Europe, ugly sells in the produce aisle”	tinyurl.com/RR-NPR-Food
PBS “News Hour” – “Why does almost half of America’s food go to waste?”	tinyurl.com/RR-NewsHour
U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service – Food loss report	tinyurl.com/RR-USDA

Video Directory

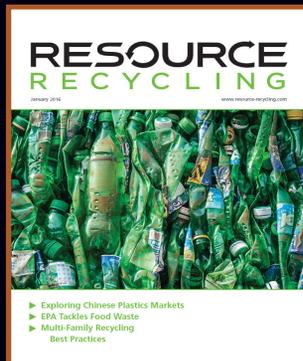
Inglorious Fruits and Vegetables	tinyurl.com/RR-Inglorious
National Geographic Live – “Tristram Stuart: The beauty of ugly food”	tinyurl.com/RR-Tristram
The New York Times – “Ugly but edible”	tinyurl.com/RR-NYT-Ugly
Ugly Food: A solution to food wastage	tinyurl.com/RR-UglyFood

as long as we focus too much on collecting food waste and not enough on preventing it. However, finding innovative ways to bring imperfect produce to consumers seems worth the effort, given the huge amount of energy, materials and water that went into growing that food in the first place.

Roger Guttentag is a recycling and solid waste consultant located in Harleysville, Pa. He can be contacted at 610-584-8836 or rguttentag@comcast.net. Guttentag has a website, recyclingandreuse.com, which houses all of his Recycling Online columns and other resources for recycling professionals of all stripes.

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