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How do we fix Ireland's food waste problem?

Updated / Tuesday, 28 Feb 2023 10:43



We need to reduce food waste across all sectors by 50% to read our 2030 targets Photo: Getty Images

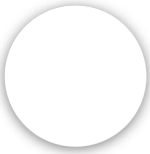
Analysis: 770,300 tonnes of food are wasted in Ireland annually, but we can take steps to prevent it

By Stephanie Marwood and Olive McCarthy, UCC

Reducing food waste has become an integral part of environmental sustainability, a challenge the Irish Government has risen to in its 2030 target to reduce food waste across all sectors by 50%. This is an ambitious target given recent estimations that 770,300 tonnes of food are wasted in Ireland annually. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that 31% of this food waste is generated by households, with the average household wasting 130kg of food, costing an average of €700 per year.

Environmentally, food production is resource intensive, meaning it requires huge amounts of land, water, and energy, so when it is wasted, these resources are also lost. Furthermore, when food is thrown out, it most often goes to landfill, causing additional environmental harm through the emission of greenhouse gases. Ireland's *National Stop Food Waste Awareness Day* takes place annually on the 1st March to raise awareness of food waste and actionable steps to prevent it. While information and awareness campaigns are valuable in bringing the issue of food waste to light, awareness does not always equate with action.

Recent research conducted by University College Cork, in collaboration with GIY and their Grow It Forward campaign, focuses on the actions that can reduce food waste. It finds that practices such as composting and growing our own food reduces our likelihood of wasting it. Composting and growing food are often interconnected practices which have regenerative properties. They reconnect us with our food, illustrate the circularity of the food system, keep us in tune with the seasons and remind us just how much time, resources and effort go into growing that one carrot.

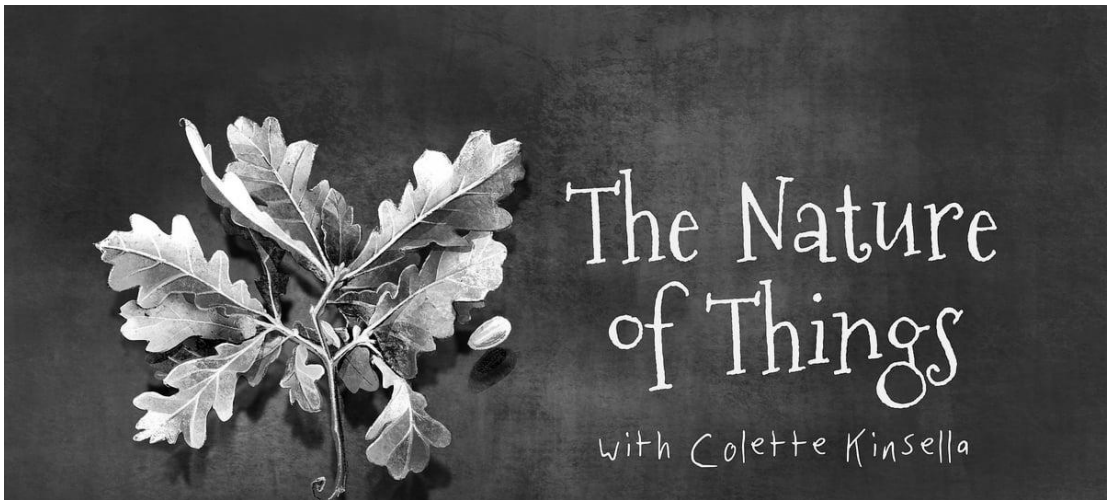


01:46

From RTÉ News, how smart bin firm aims to reduce food waste in hospitality

Growing food in gardens used to be more commonplace in Irish households but this has largely diminished with the rise of supermarkets. The practice did, however, see a resurgence during COVID lockdowns, with many turning to gardening to pass the time and reap the mental and physical benefits it provides.

Gardening inevitably leads to composting, which boasts multiple benefits in the reduction and re-use of food waste. Composting allows us to think differently about food waste. Kitchen scraps become a valuable resource to enrich our soil and garden. The experiences gained from these practices can result in more value being placed on food overall, and ultimately lead to increased efforts to reduce food waste in the home.



From RTÉ Podcast The Nature of Things, why does a compost heap get smaller?

Additionally, environmental benefits can be gained. Built up urban areas with spaces dedicated to growing food provide an oasis for wildlife and biodiversity and, in eating food from the garden, food miles and plastic packaging are reduced. By re-routing food waste from landfill, composting offers a simple and sustainable way to dispose of food and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Compost also improves yields with a reduced reliance on chemical fertilisers and recycles nutrients back into the food system.

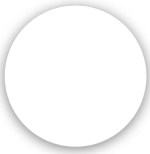
Growing food also has an important social component. Community-based organisations have close ties to growing food through community gardens, allotments, and providing advice and support to growers. Allotments and community gardens play a crucial role in making growing accessible and have the added benefit of bringing communities together through shared growing spaces, improving local areas and hosting educational programmes.

Read more: 6 ways to reduce food waste in your home

What's more, in 2022, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recognised the importance of community gardens to climate resilient development. A number of organisations support food growing in Ireland within communities. Community Gardens Ireland, the national network for community gardens, promotes and supports community gardens across the country, allowing these smaller groups to connect, share resources and exchange ideas. Social enterprise, GIY, is on a mission to get Ireland growing. They are doing so by providing resources such as starter kits, seeds, and the delivery of campaigns and support for successful growing.

However, there is always more to be done. Ireland is lagging behind other EU countries in terms of how we foster and support community gardens and allotments. A lack of dedicated space is a key issue. With demand high, Community Gardens Ireland are calling for the available allotments spaces to be doubled by 2050. According to recent figures, about two third of Ireland’s local authorities provide allotments and community gardens for public use

but only about 20% of this is permanent. This would suggest that the availability of growing space could potentially reduce or increase.



01:59

From RTÉ News, community garden provides a new 'pride of place' in Navan

The government's Climate Action Plan recognises that local authorities have a critical role to play in building climate mitigation, adaptation and biodiversity measures. Continuing and expanding supports for allotments and community gardens in local areas could serve to increase the availability of, and access to, growing spaces for those wishing to grow their own food. This, in turn, contributes to progressing wide-ranging climate measures, not least of which, is reduced household food waste.

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