Green Sense 08/24/2014

Imperfect but Edible

Would you eat a vegetable that's a bit disfigured? Or an inglorious piece of fruit? You may have your own vegetable garden, which could grow some visually imperfect looking produce, but one does not find these misfits in our supermarkets. Yet they exist - by the millions - and by the millions of tons are thrown into landfills. Food waste is worldwide, and the U.S. is not exempt.

Fruits and vegetables are a large component of our daily-recommended diet for good health, and that visual perfection can be costly.

This waste came to our attention from viewing a startling YouTube video "Inglorious Fruits and Vegetables" about a French supermarket encouraging its shoppers to buy discounted, imperfect-looking produce. Through education and taste testing, the store won the shoppers over. This video got over 4 million hits, however looking at other videos on food waste, they're lucky to have gotten a few thousand. Not a popular topic.

The supermarket calls it moche (ugly) produce. The European Union named *2014 "The Year Against Food Waste",* as it estimated over 300 million tons of good food are tossed each year.

So started an investigation of food waste in the US - it's disturbing that our 2012 estimated food waste to landfill was over 36 million tons. This is distressing for several reasons, but foremost is that in our nation there are people who aren't getting enough to eat, and children going to bed hungry.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency notes that every year Americans across the country are making difficult choices. Seniors are forced to choose between buying food or buying medicine; parents are going hungry so their children don't; and working families are forced to choose between paying their utilities or putting food on the table. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, around 14 percent of American households do not get enough food to live active, healthy lifestyles.

What makes these sad facts even harder to digest is this: a significant portion of the food tossed into our nations' trash bins is wholesome, edible food. By redirecting that unspoiled food from the landfill to our neighbors in need, an organization can support its local community, reduce its environmental impact, and save money.

An estimated 50 million Americans do not have access to enough food. This could be reduced if organizations would donate safe and healthy food to food banks, reduce food sent to landfills, and thereby help feed those in need.

Food pantries, food banks, and food rescue programs are available across the country to collect food and redistribute it to those in need. Local and national programs frequently offer free pick-up and/or reusable containers to donors.

Food donations can add up to big savings for the donors. Not only reducing waste disposal costs, donations can also generate significant tax benefits for businesses. Some organizations help you track how much food you are donating so you can more easily claim tax benefits.
One big step in effect October 2014 regarding Massachusetts' food waste, which is not limited to defective produce, is a commercial food waste disposal ban. The disposal ban affects approximately 1,700 businesses and institutions, including supermarkets, colleges, universities, hotels, convention centers, hospitals, nursing homes, restaurants and food service and processing companies.

According to Massachusetts Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, the goal is to divert 450,000 tons of food waste a year from landfills and incinerators, and direct that material to composting facilities or anaerobic digesters. This plan, which has gained international recognition, will cut greenhouse gases, lower disposal costs and preserve scarce landfill space across Massachusetts.

This is very progressive of Massachusetts, however, we should encourage our supermarkets to stock price-reduced imperfect fruits and vegetables. Ask your favorite grocery store to start a "moche campaign" and sell reduced-priced imperfect produce. By buying the "unlovely" produce from supermarkets and farmers' markets, we can greatly help reduce food waste. Encourage businesses and institutions to donate their **edible food** to food pantries, food banks, and food rescue programs.

By Reading Climate Committee members Michele Benson and Gina Snyder