

# Food wastage in SA: Why it harms the planet and what you can do to help

Up to a third of all food produced in South Africa is wasted. This translates into around 10 million tonnes that mostly ends up in our refuse dumps. When it decomposes in landfills, rotting food releases methane gas, a 'greenhouse' gas many times more damaging for the climate than carbon dioxide.



Source: [Pexels](#)

In fact, the recent IPCC [report](#) on climate change pressed for urgent action to tackle methane emissions as a way to limit climate catastrophe. The report estimated that global waste management activities, including landfills, have produced 64 million tonnes a year of methane emissions between 2008 and 2017.

## Food waste and climate change

While there's been "significant declines" in emissions from the landfill sector in Western Europe as well as from the US and Japan, much more action is needed to reduce the emissions from waste management and landfill, including here in South Africa.

But each of us changing some of our habits can make a big difference in the volumes of food that goes to waste in our country each year. "It is important to point out that much of the wastage happens at the production stage as well as at a restaurant and retail level, but there is also a big part of the waste that happens in homes," says Justice Tootla, managing director of waste management company Averda.



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## Want to reduce your food waste at home? Here are the 6 best evidence-based ways to do it

Mark Boulet 8 Oct 2021



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Tootla adds: “Many of us are guilty of unintentionally letting food go to waste. We normally buy our fruits, vegetables, and meat weekly, intending to cook and consume them. But our busy lifestyles prevent us from cooking the food, resulting in bruised, wilting, mouldy, or rotting food being thrown away. Of the food that is wasted, 44% is vegetables and fruits, 26% is grains, 15% is meat and the remaining 13% consists of oilseeds, tubers, and roots.”

These food products, he explains, end up getting tossed in the rubbish bin and end up on landfill sites where they rot, creating methane which traps up to 89 times more heat in the atmosphere than CO<sub>2</sub> and is responsible for 25% of human-produced warming.

### What you can do to help

Tootla believes there are two basic steps that every household can and should take:

- **Plan your shopping and your meals** - The first steps are looking at unnecessary purchases and developing a detailed shopping list. While we all have been taught that fresh food is best, frozen foods can be just as nutritious. For example, frozen seafood can extend the shelf life of the product considerably. Look at ways to use fruits and vegetables that are beyond ripe - sweet smoothies, bread, jams and soup stock.
- **Compost at home** - Having an outside bin for the decay of organic material means you can start a compost pile for yourself which can help you start your own garden. The way that food decays in an open compost is different from how it decays in a landfill. Home composting does not produce methane because the methane-producing microbes are not active in the presence of oxygen.



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Organic waste can be recycled and returned back into the soil. The composting process is essentially bacteria and fungi hard at work, with compounds such as fats and proteins broken down into carbon dioxide, water vapour and nitrates which is good news for the environment. Experts estimate ultimately that a proper education process can help consumers better deal with food waste, and thus, prevent 7,41m tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions.

“If we can think about better ways to deal with food waste, we can ultimately leave behind a better and cleaner planet for future generations,” Tootla concludes.

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