

In the U.S., we waste an average of 213 pounds of food per household per year. So I am often asked, “Is it better to throw food waste out in the garbage or to dispose of it in the sink using a garbage disposal?” Perhaps you’ve wondered this too? Your friendly wastewater Heloise stands ready to help.

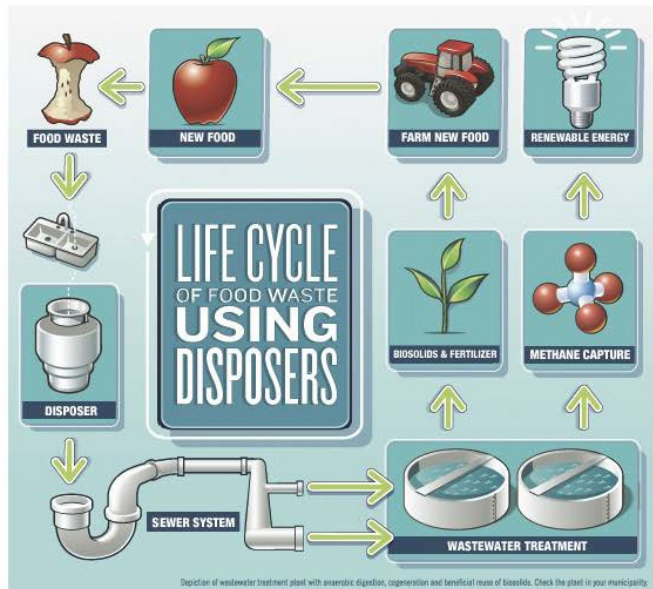
Know that the best thing you can do with food waste from your home is to **compost it** — place food scraps in a compost heap or bin along with yard waste and allow it to decompose naturally. I own a Compost Tumbler, an elevated bin with a handle that you rotate every few days. The compost produced can then be used as a natural fertilizer spread on your lawn, used in your garden or flowerbeds, given freely to friends and neighbors. Compost has additional benefits of improving soil structure, increasing drought resistance, reducing the need for fertilizer, water, even pesticides. But, of course, many people don’t have yards or don’t want the obligation of managing their own food scraps and yard waste.

So, the next best option is — drum roll here! — to use a **garbage disposal**, that is, to put food scraps down the sink and have them chewed up by what’s called in the business a food waste disposer (FWD) and conveyed along with other household waste to a sewage treatment plant. Does that surprise you? It may.

Here’s why using a garbage disposal is better for the environment than throwing food waste out to be trucked to a landfill. Food waste — principally vegetables and fruits — can comprise up to 20 percent of the garbage collected in cities. The average household has 213 lbs. of food waste a year. That’s a lot of weight to be trucked to landfills and a big cost to municipalities.

When organic matter decomposes in landfills, it produces methane gas, a far more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide (21 times the global warming potential of CO₂). Landfills have methods to capture this methane gas, but they are not nearly as efficient as wastewater treatment plants. When food scraps are sent via the waste stream to wastewater plants, the anaerobic digesters there capture the methane generated by decomposition of organic matter and convert the gas to electricity or to biofuel — renewable energy!

The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District currently captures between 50 and 80 percent of the methane generated at the treatment plants using it to heat the digesters and facilities. At some times of the year, however, the plants produce more methane than they can use so the excess is flared off. Happily, plans are underway to develop new facilities at the Calumet and Stickney plants to generate, capture and reuse



Depiction of wastewater treatment plant with anaerobic digestion, cogeneration and beneficial reuse of biosolids. Check the plant in your municipality.

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even more of the methane produced by the sewage treatment process and use it to produce electricity or biofuel.

East Bay Municipal Utility District in Oakland, CA was the first wastewater treatment plant in the nation to convert post-consumer food scraps to energy via anaerobic digestion.

A pilot program in Philadelphia seeking to reduce the amount of food waste going to landfills will install garbage disposals in 200 homes. There the city has gathered baseline data on the amount of food waste in garbage — roughly 10 percent — and hopes to see a reduction once the disposals are in use. Every ton of garbage diverted from landfills saves the city \$68 in tipping fees whereas the disposals are estimated to use less than one percent of a household’s total water consumption and to cost less than 50 cents a year in electricity to operate.

(The Chicago Conservation Corps and InSinkEerator, the largest manufacturer of food waste disposers, are collaborating on a similar study in Chicago’s Uptown and Maple Park neighborhoods. For information on that project, contact (866) 271-1085 or ChicagoInSinkEeratorproject@gmail.com)

A 2011 study reported that if 30,000 households switched from disposing of food waste in a landfill to using a garbage disposal, the reduction in global warming potential would be equivalent to a savings of 4.6 million miles driven in the average American car or “100 community members going carbon neutral for a year.” Think of what that might mean if all of the 1.9 million households in Cook County had — and used — garbage disposals! ■