

Your Inner Trash Animal

There's a lot you can do with the food scraps you usually throw away.



Crushed eggshells can be blended with water to give plants a boost of calcium and magnesium. Credit... Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

By Gray Chapman

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In the 1973 animated classic “Charlotte’s Web,” an entire musical number is dedicated to the film’s antagonist, a rat named Templeton, feasting on garbage at the county fair. He tosses apple cores, banana peels and turkey legs down his craw with abandon. At one point, he juggles snacks foraged from the dumpster while simultaneously using a discarded melon rind as a surfboard. The rat doesn’t merely survive on garbage — he thrives among it.

Now, as humans around the world bed down in their nests, many are faced with the fact of their own mounting trash. Even those who once diligently gathered their onion skins and citrus husks for compost may now be stuck with a decision: freeze their organic waste for stock or throw it away?

Out of anxiety, guilt, newfound virtue, frugality or a combination of the above, some frequent tosser-outers are changing their habits, whirling carrot tops into pesto and giddily watching their green onions grow tiny roots in jars of water.

In the face of pandemic, climate dread and the seemingly ceaseless parade of macabre that is the news, saving a couple of onions from the dumpster may feel akin to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

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But [as Tejal Rao put it last week in The New York Times](#), “it could also shape a collective response, and all of these small habits could add up to a meaningful shift that changes our food culture.” And on the most individual level, these small grasps at sovereignty may also yield some scrap of agency over our own lives.

Here are a handful of things you can make with your would-be garbage.



Image

Beef and pork fat can be rendered and clarified to make candles. Credit... Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Animal-Fat Candles

Kami Ahrens, an assistant curator at the [Foxfire Foundation](#), an Appalachian heritage preservation center in Mountain City, Ga., said that 20th-century Appalachian homesteaders were scrupulous about conserving and repurposing their hard-fought resources. “There was a saying that when you used a hog, you used everything but the squeal,” she said.

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Animal fat, for instance, was used to bake cornbread, seasoned cast iron, and make soaps and candles.

To set a fire-lit mood in your home, simmer pork or beef fat at a low temperature on the stove, or in a crock pot for several hours with a bit of water. Skim the solids that rise to the top, then pour the leftover liquid into a jar. Dip a wick into the jar, and voilà: You have a perfectly serviceable candle that, lacking as it may be in aesthetics, can do wonders for your sense of self-sufficiency. And, Ms. Ahrens said reassuringly, it won’t smell like meat.

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Plant-Based Dyes

Onion skins, beet tops, carrot leaves, avocado pits and tea bags can all be used as [natural dyes](#), which are less saturated but yield pleasantly muted hues. [Avocado pits](#) will lend a





soft blush tone, coffee lends somewhere on the ochre-to-sand spectrum, and hibiscus tea imparts mauves and muted reds.

Even the cooking water from black beans can be used, according to Anastasia Cole Plakias, a founder of the rooftop farming company [Brooklyn Grange](#). “It makes a really beautiful, very pale blue,” she said. Ms. Plakias also makes watercolors from vegetable dyes and even uses beets to add color, and subtle sweetness, to frosting.

The dyeing process requires brewing a concentrated tea from your ingredients, then simmering unbleached natural fabric, like cotton, linen or wool, in the dye. To do this, you’ll need a pot dedicated to dyeing and a mordant, which fixes the color in place. Typically people buy alum, though other folk solutions include boiling a pot of old nails. (This is why you do not want to use your dye pot for cooking later.)

Image

When chicken bones are dried and ground, they become a high-phosphorous fertilizer for soil. Credit...Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Gardening Materials

Simon Perez, who developed recipes for “[Future Food Today](#),” a cookbook focused on sustainable eating, said that crushed eggshells can be blended with water to give plants a boost of calcium and magnesium, and coffee grounds sprinkled directly on the soil add a jolt of nitrogen.

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Ms. Ahrens, of Foxfire, recommends drying out chicken bones in a dehydrator or low-temperature oven, then grinding them into bone meal with a food processor. (“You can also mash them with a hammer,” she said.) The result is a fertilizer rich in phosphorus, one of the primary nutrients plants require.

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In the last couple of weeks, regrowing scallions appears to have supplanted [sourdough baking](#) as the isolation coping mechanism of choice. Alliums in general are well suited for regrowing, as are celery crowns, herbs like mint and even pineapple tops (though, in the best of circumstances, it would be a few years before you’d see any fruit from your labor).

Yolanda Gonzalez, an urban agriculture specialist with Cornell Cooperative Extension, said that green onions are the easiest to regenerate: “All you have to do is cut them from



about an inch from the roots and leave them in a glass of water.” She recommended experimenting with [Egyptian walking onions](#), which form bulbils that can be broken off and replanted.

Image



Some produce, like scallions, romaine lettuce and carrot tops, can be regenerated on a windowsill. Credit...Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Fruit-Rind Cocktails

After brewing a pot of coffee at home, Claire Sprouse doesn't always toss her spent grounds. Instead, she makes what she calls “old-brew,” running the grounds through a second brew cycle. The bitter, diluted result isn't something you'd necessarily want to drink out of a coffee mug, but when combined with equal parts sugar, it becomes a syrup ideal for use in an espresso martini or an old fashioned.

Ms. Sprouse, whose Brooklyn cafe and bar, Hunky Dory, has been in limbo since mid-March, has been cooking at home much more than usual. “The capacity for food waste right now is very high,” she said.

Inspired by the challenge, Ms. Sprouse reached out to bartenders around the country for cocktail recipes that make use of kitchen scraps. The resulting collection, “Optimistic Cocktails,” is [available online](#), as a PDF, for \$15; all proceeds will go to the contributing bars and a group of undocumented workers funds. Recipes include a drink incorporating a banana peel syrup with rum, lime and orange juice.

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Humans have managed to turn leftover fruit into booze from time immemorial.

Tepache, a fermented Mexican drink made from the rinds of pineapples, is easy to make and delicious in a highball.

“Traditionally, people would take pineapple rinds, a bit of the fruit, baking spices and sugar, and cover it all with water,” Ms. Sprouse said. Put the brew in a cheesecloth-covered jar and let fermentation work its magic for a low-A.B.V. drink. At home, Ms. Sprouse enjoys hers with a bit of tequila.



Image



Apple peels and other fruit rinds can be saved to make syrup for a cocktail. Credit... Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Some may toss citrus peels into the compost pile after juicing them, but the peel itself has its own flavor and aroma. “You’re getting all that fresh, eye-opening citrus that wakes you up,” Ms. Sprouse said, “like walking into a juice shop and smelling all the zest in the air.” To capture the citrusy goodness, place your

collected peels in a bowl, dust them with sugar and let them sit on the countertop, covered, for a day or so. The sugar will extract citrus oil from the peels, resulting in a bracingly bright syrup ideal for a Collins or gimlet. Fold a bit of citrus juice (if you have it; water, if you don’t) into the mixture to incorporate the sugar, then cut it with vodka to give it a longer shelf life in the fridge.

Whether you use your discards to whip up a syrup, a cordial or something else, don’t get too caught up in precise measurements. This is the time to embrace experimentation, Ms. Sprouse said, tasting as you go and making tweaks along the way. “You never know what magic can come from that.”

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