

Making the Most of Your Food Donations

In times of economic stress, individuals and families are increasingly forced to rely on food pantries and other sources of emergency food assistance, like meal sites and shelters, to meet their basic needs.

Collecting food to donate to a local food bank or food pantry is just one way to contribute to preventing hunger in your community. Keep the following tips in mind to enhance the quality and nutritional value of food donations in your community.

Product Quality concerns

- Donate only unopened packages.
- Avoid foods with packages that show sign of leakage or damage. Do not donate canned items that have broken seams or large dents.
- Check the dates on packages of foods that you donate. Many packaged items are marked with dates that indicate freshness.

Examples of packaging dates:

- **Quality or pack dates** often designated on packages by the words "better if used by..." and a date. Look for these dates on packaged mixes, cold cereals, peanut butter, and increasingly, on canned items like fruits and vegetables. These dates mean that after the quality date, the food will begin to lose its flavor and may even develop an off flavor. Quality dates are an estimate of how long foods will remain at their peak quality. Donate only foods that are well within the quality dates marked on the package.
- **Expiration dates**, such as "Expires 2/15/12" or "Do not use after 7/9/11." Look for these dates on vitamins, yeast, baking powder and cake mixes. Do not donate foods that are past their expiration date.
- **Pull dates**. Example: "Sell by May 16." Look for these dates on perishable, refrigerated foods such as milk, yogurt, cottage cheese, cream, eggs, lunch meat and packaged salad mixes. Perishable foods, with the exception of garden produce, are usually not included in a food drive. If they are, choose foods that are well within the pull date for best quality.

Home canned foods, and meat or eggs that have not been handled by licensed food processors should not be donated.



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333 E. Washington St., #1200, West Bend, WI 53095. 262-335-4841.
<http://washington.uwex.edu>



Food Items

Consider collecting healthier combinations of food donations to help meet recipients' and/or family food needs. In general avoid sugary cereals, salty noodle mixes, and fruit-flavored beverages, and choose foods that have a stable shelf life, are full of nutrients and are easy to prepare. Some pantries might also welcome fresh produce.

Always check with your local food bank or food pantry to determine their donation policy, preferences, and needs.

Foods to donate:

- Whole grain, low-sugar cereals such as plain instant oatmeal, whole grain Os, and bran flakes.
- Whole grain or enriched pasta and instant rice—either brown or enriched. Boxed noodle and rice dishes can be an easy starting point for a one-dish meal.
- Whole grain crackers (especially reduced-sodium) and popcorn.
- Canned vegetables, especially those without added salt.
- Fruits canned in juice, unsweetened applesauce, 100-percent fruit juice and dried fruit such as raisins or raisins.
- Spaghetti sauce, salsa and canned beans, including baked beans.
- Canned meats. Food pantries tend to receive a lot of canned salmon or tuna, so consider other meats such as canned chicken, ham or beef. Do not donate meat canned at home.
- Peanuts and peanut butter.
- Reduced-sodium broth and soups.
- Low-fat salad dressings or spreads, and condiments such as ketchup or mustard.

Non-food Items

Pantries may also be in need of non-food personal hygiene items.

Non-food items to donate:

- Disposable diapers
- Sanitary napkins
- Toilet paper
- Facial tissue
- Paper towels
- Bar soap and liquid dish soap
- Shampoo
- Toothbrushes and toothpaste
- Laundry detergent

Consider donating cash to food pantries. Pantries can often get more for their dollars, address shortages and needs, and focus on high quality products with some extra financial assistance.

Strategies for sourcing fresh produce donations:

- Consider “planting a row for the hungry” in your home, church, school, or community garden.
- Start a food pantry garden to grow food for your pantry donations – contact your local UW-Extension, Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Program for garden support
- Collect unsold produce from your local farmers market or directly from your local farmers.
- Donate seeds or seedlings.
- Donate unclaimed community supported agriculture (CSA) shares.
- Purchase grocery store vouchers or gift cards for donation at the food pantry.