



GUIDE TO SUSTAINABLE CATERING

Zero Waste Planning Guide Chapter

Introduction

Sharing a meal can play an important community-building function, attract people to hear your message or support your organization, or simply provide sustenance to busy students as they attend yet another meeting rather than attending to their dietary needs. Food and dinnerware do, however, constitute the most significant source of waste and environmental impact at most campus events. For this reason, it is important to take some simple steps to make food and food service more sustainable.

Sustainability

When we talk about sustainable food sourcing and service, we are promoting the following general guidelines:

- **Locally grown:** Lower food miles traveled typically means a smaller carbon footprint. Furthermore, supporting local farmers helps maintain regional agricultural production that connects urban areas to nearby farming communities.
- **Organic:** Chemical inputs used in conventional farming are a major source of pollutants in our waterways and can diminish soil quality over time. Organic farmers do not use chemical inputs and are considered better stewards of the land.
- **Fresh:** Fresh food is healthier, containing nutrients in forms much more readily accessible to our bodies than nutrients in processed foods. Furthermore, a lack of processing reduces the environmental impact of fresh foods.
- **Healthy:** Food providers should ensure that healthy options are available, whether the customer is looking for a snack or a full meal. Unhealthy food is readily available; it may take a bit more planning and effort to provide healthier food, but it can be done.
- **Reusable, compostable or recyclable dinnerware:** The optimal choice for dinner service is china (or other reusable dinnerware), as this has the lowest environmental impact and is the most pleasant for diners. Recognizing that reusable dinnerware is not always available and appropriate, other options include compostable dinnerware (if composting facilities are available) and recyclable dinnerware.
- **Vegetarian:** Events should offer attractive and nutritious vegetarian options to serve the needs of this constituency. Additionally, reduced fish and meat consumption is linked to a reduced carbon footprint.



- **Ethically produced:** Others should not be taking unreasonable risks and making unreasonable salaries to produce and serve the food we consume. Vendors operating on campus should be paying a living wage, and working to ensure that suppliers down the chain are doing the same by, for example, only serving Fair Trade coffee, chocolate and bananas.
- **Quality:** Besides serving food that is better for the planet and its producers, food should taste great, too. People take their food more seriously if they enjoy it.

Given these principles, how do we go about implementing them? We hope this guide to **Caterers, Dinnerware** and **Food Waste** answers this question for you, making food sourcing and service at your events more sustainable.

Caterers

Unless you are planning to cook yourself, your choice of caterer will largely dictate whether or not you can meet the above principles. For this reason, we have created a list of caterers we think are capable of fulfilling all or many of the guidelines, which are attached as Appendix 1. As the catering list is not exhaustive, we would certainly be happy to hear feedback regarding additions or deletions. We would especially like to see this list grow as more ‘conventional’ caterers begin to offer options that meet these principles. For this reason, we have compiled a list of questions to ask caterers in order to understand the degree of their alignment with the principles. In fact, posing these questions to all caterers, even those in Appendix 1, emphasizes an interest in their offerings and encourages them to seek out sustainable ingredients.

Questions for Caterers to assess their sustainability:

- Can you offer a **seasonal menu** featuring **locally grown ingredients**? Do you have local suppliers you could source these ingredients from? Which ingredients can you procure locally, and how would you define ‘local’?
- Can you cater a meal using all or mostly **certified organic ingredients**? Which ingredients are or are you not able to procure organically? Do you have the means to confirm their certification?
- **Will you prepare** all of the items you serve? What will be frozen or purchased fresh?
- Are you able to provide **dietary information** on the menu you serve?
- Are you able to offer a **healthier menu** (e.g. lower in calories), either exclusively or as one option for an event?
- What types of **vegetarian menus** can you offer?
- Are the coffee, bananas, and/or chocolate you offer **Fair Trade certified**?



- Are you able to serve on china and/or offer **reusable serving ware**? Can you use reusable tablecloths and napkins?
- Are you able to serve on **compostable dinnerware**? How about **recyclable**? Do you provide any materials to assist clients to process their waste properly?
- Do you pay your employees a **living wage**?
- What will it **cost** to meet the issues we have discussed?
- Can you detail these items in the **catering contract**?

Dinnerware

Countless plastic plates and paper cups are disposed of here at MIT every day.¹ While many students carry their own mugs and water bottles, which can be further encouraged via raffles and other incentives at your events, it is not likely that the majority will begin carrying their own plates and cutlery. Catering on china is a great option but is not always possible because either the caterer cannot accommodate the need or the added expense is too great. Finger foods can reduce the amount of dinnerware required but are not always suitable.

This reality leaves compostable and recyclable dinnerware as the most feasible options. While neither is comparable to reusable dinnerware, they are better options than conventional plasticware. The caveat is that they must be used properly; in many cases, diners dispose of recyclable and compostable dinnerware in the incorrect receptacles. To capitalize on the use of compostable and recyclable dinnerware, we offer the following suggestions:

- Only use **compostable dinnerware** if composting facilities are available. If you are composting your dinnerware, try to obtain everything in compostable form (utensils, cups, etc.) to simplify the composting process
- Properly **label your receptacles** to educate users and avoid confusion
- Clearly **announce your waste management plans** so that diners will use it properly and gain awareness
- Consider using '**garbage monitors**' initially to assist in the success of this regimen to ensure compliance and educate users
- Make sure that those **handling the waste after the event** are aware of your regimen and accommodate it

¹ According to the Department of Facilities, MIT generated approximately 8,000 tons of waste in 2005 (<http://web.mit.edu/facilities/environmental/waste-facts.html>). A 2003 waste audit conducted by students found that cups and clamshell containers alone constituted approximately 5% of the waste stream in the main group of campus buildings (<http://lfee.mit.edu/public/web2003presentation.pdf>).



Note that Sustainability@MIT has a set of cloth napkins that they will loan for events. We suggest accessing this option, particularly if you are serving finger food. Contact Kathreen Thome (kathreen@mit.edu) for more information.

Food waste

The first step in eliminating food waste is carefully planning to avoid excess. Request RSVPs for more accurate estimates. Then, break down the food waste into two categories: Pre- and post-consumer.

Pre-consumer food waste (i.e. food that has not been on someone's plate) may be a treasure to others, be they busy grad students trying to save a buck or the less fortunate depending on the food bank to make ends meet. The 'free-food@mit.edu' e-mail list is one way to attract a hungry crowd to your leftovers quickly. If you have large volumes of leftovers, and especially if they are non-perishable, you may consider contacting a food bank to see if they will accept a donation.²

Post-consumer food leftovers constitute a major proportion of our waste stream.³ Composting is the best alternative for their disposal but is not currently conducted campus-wide. If you plan ahead, however, you may access the compost receptacles in the basement of the Stata Center, which are managed by Save That Stuff. You should contact Adam (617-241-9998 or adam@savethatstuff.com) for information on food waste deliveries. Contamination is a key issue in composting, so you must make sure that your guests are aware of the parameters.

Instead of....Try a more sustainable choice...

- Individual cans of soda (\$1-\$2 per person)...serve local apple cider (\$6 per gallon)
- Individual water bottles (\$1-\$2 per bottle)...use a refillable pitcher (one-time price of \$5)
- Boxed lunches (\$12-\$15 per lunch)...serve veggie and cold-cut platters (\$5-\$10 per person)
- Dessert trays (\$1-\$2 per person)...serve local, seasonal fruit (\$0.50-\$2 per person)
- Serving meals on disposable plates and cutlery...plan menus with finger foods that require less waste (cut veggies with hummus, bread and cheese, whole fruit)
- Centering a meal around meat...serve vegetarian meals with favorites like lasagna, Mediterranean food, and veggie sushi rolls
- Beef...choose chicken, sustainably-harvested fish, or vegetarian meals. The production of beef is ten times as carbon-intensive as chicken production; and vegetarian food has an even smaller carbon footprint.

² A list of Cambridge food pantries can be found online at: <http://www.cambridgema.gov/dhsp2/meals1.cfm>

³ 'Organics', which would largely consist of food scraps, constituted 8.2% of the waste stream in the main campus buildings, 14.4% in the student center, and 38.1% in the New House residence hall in the 2003 waste audit (<http://lfee.mit.edu/public/web2003presentation.pdf>)



Appendix 1: Recommended caterers

Note: This is not an exhaustive list of caterers that can make your event more sustainable. We would love to hear your suggestions for additions, and also recommend that you ask any caterer the questions posed in the Caterers section to see what they can offer. Furthermore, not all of these caterers will automatically meet the sustainable food sourcing and service principles outlined; you should always ask so you know what you are getting, make your event as sustainable as possible, and show that you are committed.

Bagel Rising, Allston (www.bagelrising.com/catering or 617-789-4000)

Type of food: Breakfast, lunch, deli and veggie platters

Why we like them: Organic ingredients, compostable dinnerware, environmentally-friendly business practices

Basil Tree, Somerville (www.basiltree.com or 617-776-9100)

Type of food: Entrees, sides, salads, sandwiches, vegetarian, vegan, and gluten-free

Why we like them: Minimal waste, compostable dinnerware, donates to local environmental initiatives

Beaujolais, Arlington (www.beaujolaiscatering.com or 781-641-0548)

Type of food: Entrees, sides, salads, sandwiches

Why we like them: When requested, incorporates local and organic ingredients

Bon Appetit, MIT (617-253-4952)

Type of food: Breakfast, sandwiches, fruit and vegetables trays, dinner

Why we like them: Supports sustainable and local food producers

Haley House Café, Roxbury (www.haleyhouse.org or 617-445-0900)

Type of food: Breakfast, sandwiches, homestyle meals

Why we like them: Community-activist nonprofit using organic ingredients from a local farm

Harvest Co-op, Central Square (www.harvestcoop.com or 617-661-1580)

Type of food: Sandwiches, salads, veggie and sushi platters

Why we like them: Emphasis on organic, local, and fair-trade; member-owned; hosts farmers market May-Nov.

Lionette's Market, South End (www.lionettesmarket.com or 617-778-0360)

Type of food: Local meats, pasta, sides

Why we like them: All meat, dairy, and seasonal produce from local, sustainable farms



Sebastian's, Cambridge/Kendall (www.sebastians.com or 617-385-5642)

Type of food: Breakfast, sandwiches, custom salads

Why we like them: Vegetarian options

Trader Joe's, Cambridge (617-491-8582)

Type of food: Prepared foods, desserts, snacks

Why we like them: Many products incorporate organic ingredients

Veggie Planet, Harvard Square (catering@veggieplanet.net or 617-661-1513)

Type of food: Veggies on pizzas or rice, vegetarian and vegan

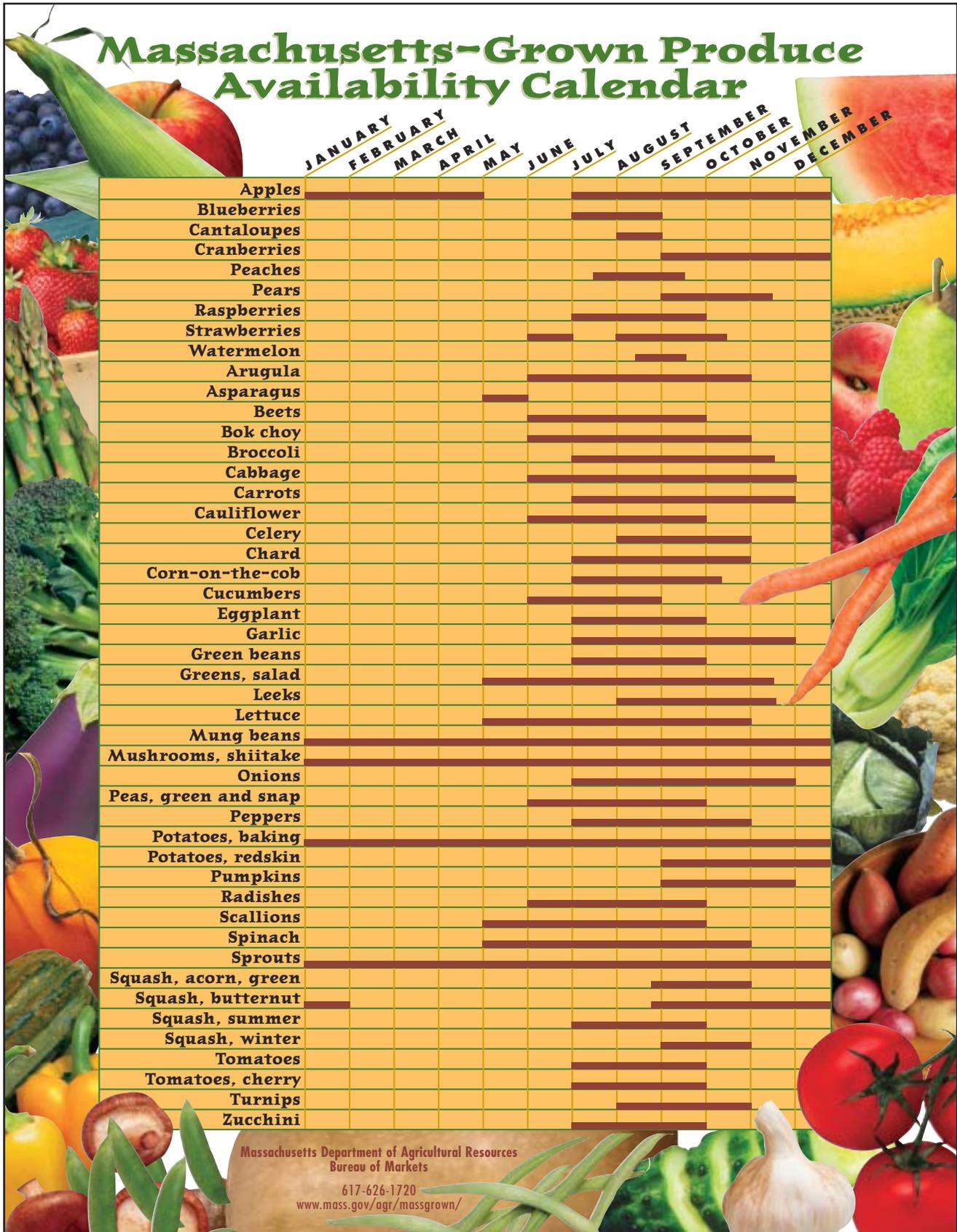
Why we like them: Vegan meals available, donates to local anti-hunger groups

Whole Foods, Central Square (617-492-0070) and Cambridgeport (617-876-6990)

Type of food: Meats, veggie platters, prepared foods

Why we like them: All natural or organic ingredients with local preference

Appendix 2: Massachusetts-Grown Produce Availability Calendar



Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources
 Bureau of Markets
 617-626-1720
www.mass.gov/agr/massgrown/

Source: Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, Bureau of Markets (www.mass.gov/agr/massgrown)



Appendix 3: About Food@MIT

Vision: A campus where sustainable food is the norm

What do we mean by sustainable food?

- Locally grown and organic foods
- Fresh and healthy foods
- Higher quality and more diverse food options better distributed across campus
- Reusable dinnerware, compostable or recyclable packaging, and the infrastructure to support its use
- Vegetarian and vegan options
- More sit-down establishments to encourage community building through dining

Goals

- Raise awareness among students, faculty and staff of sustainability and sustainable food (and the costs of feeding MIT through non-sustainable means)
- Increase demand for higher quality, sustainable foods on campus
- Support New England agriculture through local purchasing

Activities & Accomplishments

- Speaker series and film screening
- Work with various vendors on how they can make their operations more sustainable
- Work with those who order catering services on how to make events more sustainable
- Organize a Community Supported Agriculture scheme on-campus
- Lobby administrators to improve campus dining and waste management

Want to get involved or learn more?

Visit <http://sustainability.mit.edu/food> or email us at food@mit.edu