

Making the Holidays Greener

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So, summer is over and the kids are all back in school. Before you know it, the holidays will be upon us with parties and dinners to spread the good cheer. Unfortunately, these get-togethers too often become garbage machines, churning out disposable dinnerware and wrapping paper galore. The good news is that the holidays do not have to be wasteful. Environmentally friendly alternatives for traditional events do exist. Here are some hints to help you have a "greener" holiday.

Although people want to show off their homes during the holidays, decorating does not have to be wasteful. For instance, in many homes, the Christmas tree is the focal point for holiday décor. Every year thousands of trees are cut down for this purpose, only to be discarded shortly after the holidays. Many communities mulch these trees following the holiday season, but if yours does not, consider using an artificial tree. Although there is probable pollution from manufacturing artificial trees, the benefit of reusing the fake conifers year after year is redeeming. However, many people feel that the holidays are not the same without a real tree. For those traditionalists, there is the better, 'greener' option of purchasing a balled tree; a live tree that is dug out of the ground and the ball of dirt and roots at the bottom bundled in burlap so the tree can be replanted later. Using this method saves trees from destruction while providing landscaping for your property.

Exterior lighting also plays a big role in home decoration during the holidays. Keep in mind the amount of energy you are using and keep your lighting simple. Turn lights off during the day and at night when you go to bed. Using automatic timers for all lights can help save energy and money.

Making your own decorations can also save money and prevent pollution. Make traditional garlands of strings of popcorn and cranberry. Holly and cedar branches also make beautiful ornamentation. Homemade air fresheners can easily be made by boiling cinnamon, cloves, and other spices in water. However, the best air freshener of all is always fresh baked cookies.

Now that your home is looking sharp and smelling sweet, it is time to prepare for holiday guests. When planning holiday functions, always remember to reduce, reuse, and recycle. Simplify your events by cutting down on the quantity and variety of supplies and menu items, thereby avoiding food and packaging waste. Start by sending invitations by phone or e-mail instead of mailing cards. When shopping, purchase foods in reusable or recyclable containers and in bulk to avoid excess packaging. Another simple thing that you can do is plan your menu around local, seasonally available fruits, vegetables, and meats. Most people do not think of this, but by supporting local growers, you will cut down on pollution from transporting food items over long distances.

When you set the table, opt for reusable tablecloths, napkins, plates, and cutlery. You can easily make edible or reusable party favors such as cookies, candy, ornaments, or other home decorations. After your decorations are all in place, the table has been set, and the meal is ready, enjoy the warmth of the holiday spirit with your family and friends, but remember, you have only fought half the battle. You still have to clean up after the meal is over and the guests have left. If possible, recycle and compost your waste. Nowadays, many people recycle, but those who compost are few and far between. Composting is easy and, during the holidays, there is always plenty to compost.

Last but not least, possibly the biggest source of holiday solid waste is wrapping paper. This year, instead of paper, use fabric, reusable gift bags or boxes, and simple, minimal, reusable wrapping decorations such as ribbons. For instance, tying a small branch of pine, boxwood, or a holiday decoration to the top of a box with a beautiful ribbon is a great way to decorate naturally with reusable materials.

You now have some basic guidelines going into the holiday season to help you help the earth. Remember, reduce consumption, reuse products and materials, and recycle waste, and you will be on the right track to having an 'eco-friendly' holiday season.