

2021 “Green” Holiday Ideas

by Maria Bartlett Environmental Awareness Garden Club Federation of Massachusetts

In the past, Americans generated 25% more trash during the holidays than during the rest of the year! This year may again be like last year....less shopping, fewer and smaller gatherings, often a sad time remembering a loved one no longer with us. But, by being eco-friendly, we can add a needed encouraging care-for-the-future spirit to the season.

Consider the following ideas:

1. If you want to avoid indoors and crowds, you may want to shop online and have gifts shipped. Find organic and/or free trade items. For example, check out Taza Chocolate locally produced in Somerville, MA.
2. If you shop at Amazon, go through Amazon Smile. A percent of your purchase is donated at no extra cost to you to any nonprofit organization you choose.
3. Consider giving the gift of indoor plants...something nice to add cheer to all our indoor at-home time this winter if covid rages again!
4. Buying water in plastic bottles may be convenient but it is wasteful and harmful to the environment. Give a gift of a stainless-steel water bottle that can be filled with tap water. If you have taste/safety concerns about tap water, give the gift of a water filtration system or Brita pitcher along with the stainless-steel water bottle. Add a set of stainless-steel straws!
5. Give a programmable thermostat so the heat can be turned down in the winter when you are asleep or away. They also work in the summer to turn up the temperature to save on A/C electricity.
6. A tire pressure gauge makes a great gift for less than \$10. Correctly inflated tires can save 20% at the pump-important now that gasoline prices are so high. And deduces CO2 emissions, too. Add a gift certificate for wheel alignment...that saves MPG, too.
7. Group gifts around a theme:
 - Programable thermostat, silk long underwear, a fleece shirt and a draft snake.
 - b. Omnivore's Dilemma and a vegetarian cookbook.
 - c. A polyester shower curtain liner/cotton shower curtain to replace the vinyl one (which off gases chemicals that pollute indoor air) and natural bar soap instead of plastic dispensers.
 - d. Free trade coffee and chocolates and organic teas.
 - e. A HEPA vacuum cleaner, a shoe rack and slippers to keep outdoor pollutants outside.
 - f. A rubber or stainless-steel hose (to replace the phthalates in the vinyl ones), gift certificate with seed catalogues and a soil test kit.
 - g. A tire pressure gauge and certificates to a car wash--saves water over the at-home version.
 - h. A gift certificate to a garden center and a list or book about native plants to buy there.
 - i. A LED flashlight and LED lightbulbs.
8. Gardening items for the gardener: a countertop compost crock and/or a compost bin. Give a certificate for a soil test or a soil test kit to get someone started on organic lawn care. Give a rain barrel to save and conserve water. Give a book about organic gardening or native plants.

9. How about a set of napkins rings the family will use and cherish. Find napkins rings that can be personalized...children especially like this. Add a nice set of cloth napkins. (The Museum of Modern Art sells a set of 6-Fold-by-Number Cloth Napkins that are fun for the whole family.)

10. Reuse/Recycle! Gift quality not-new items from your own bookshelf or attic or basement. For example: combine a set of glass beer mugs you never use with a 6-pack of a specialty beer; flower pots with cuttings from your own garden or house plants; or have someone's treasured item repaired.

11. Use recycled wrap for gifts. Don't use foil paper...it can't be recycled. Avoid glitter...it is toxic to the environment. Buy or make fabric gift bags to reuse over the years-go online for directions or sources. Recycle the fronts of holiday cards from past years to use as gift tags.

12. With many venues again open, you can give activities and events rather than "stuff." Gift certificates for shows, movies, online cooking classes, and take-out dinners are great ideas!

13. Purchase a membership for someone to a conservation or environmental organization such as Mass Audubon, Sierra Club, Alliance for a Healthy Tomorrow, Natural Resources Defense Council, Environmental Working Group, Mothers Out Front or Silent Spring Institute.

14. Do not give gag/useless gifts the recipient cannot/will not use...these often end up in the trash.

15. Give the gift of your time: an IOU to bake and deliver a special food or meal; teach someone to knit or crochet via Facetime; talk someone through converting to organic lawn care; offer to weed a garden when spring comes; or teach a computer skill.

16. Raise awareness this season--have the family watch an environmental show such as Gasland, The Story of Stuff, King Corn, or Dark Waters. My favorites: the story of tired land becoming a vital eco-farm in **Biggest Little Farm** and **David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet**, both on Netflix.

17. Work together on a computer calculation of the family's Carbon Footprint. Go to <https://www3.epa.gov/carbon-footprint-calculator/>. Then, decide on a carbon diet goal for your New Year's resolution. Use Low Carbon Diet: a 30-Day Program to Lose 5000 Pounds to work on a plan.

18. Christmas trees: it's best to buy a live tree and plant it after the holidays. Or buy a locally grown cut tree collected after the holidays by your town and composted. Avoid artificial trees---they are made from fossil fuels, produce lots of CO2 getting here from China, never break down and usually come without LED lights. If you have one, never throw it out--pass it on or donate it when you no longer use it. Replace its standard light strings with LED strings, saving lots of electricity!

Use greens from your own yard to decorate the house. Give gift certificates for plants that can provide these greens in future years: holly, ilex verticulata, yellow and red-twiggged dogwood, evergreen trees, Japanese Andromeda, or yellow Chamaecyparis.

Use LED lights for your holiday decorations...these use 90% less electricity. Even costing a bit more up front, you save that cost and much more on your electric bills in the very first year. LED candles are a good idea, too. To light your outdoor walkways, consider solar lights as well as solar spotlights to highlight door and yard decorations. Do not use those lighted air-inflated plastic figures!

19. Use candles made from beeswax or soy with natural fragrances. Regular candles are petroleum-based and the fragrances are artificial chemicals that add to indoor air pollution. Use home-made potpourri of spices and orange peels and boil in a pan on the stove to scent the air instead of purchased air fresheners or heavily artificially scented holiday items.

20. We may especially want the warm glow of a real fire this holiday season. But fireplace fires allow warm air to escape the house...enjoy them sparingly. Most important, skip the wood...the mold and particulate matter can aggravate allergies and pollute indoor air, especially now with respiratory illnesses of concern. Instead, use Duraflame or other manufactured logs...much more eco-friendly! Remember to close the dampers after things have cooled down.

21. When cleaning your home, use products that do not contain harsh toxic substances such as bleach or ammonia that are asthma triggers. **Go to TURI.org** for a list of disinfectants that are safe and effective. Avoid “anti-bacterial” soaps ...use plain soap and water instead.

22. Decide to deemphasize meat at mealtime and highlight all the wonderful vegetables and fruits abundant this time of year, as well as grains and breads. Serve local chicken or turkey rather than beef, lamb or pork, which are more likely to have antibiotics and hormones added and which contribute much more to global warming in their production.

23. Prepare food in smaller quantities to cut down on food waste which is the largest component of landfills. Eat leftovers! Compost what isn't edible in your own bins or sign up for a compost collection service in your area. (Offbeet Compost and Black Earth Compost offer such services in the Merrimack Valley area.)

24. If serving fish for holiday meals, check the Monterey Bay Aquarium website for eco-friendly seafood choices/pocket guides: <https://www.seafoodwatch.org/recommendations/download-consumer-guides>

25. Plastic containers/wrap can leach toxic substances into food. Store holiday leftovers in stainless steel, glass or ceramic containers and never reheat in plastic containers in the microwave. Use paper towels to cover when reheating. Give the gift of glass or silicone storage containers and beeswax food covers to replace plastic items. (https://www.etsy.com/market/beeswax_food_covers)

26. For mealtime, use cloth napkins and napkin rings rather than paper napkins, or at least buy paper napkins made from recycled paper. Buy paper towels and bathroom tissue made from recycled paper, too. Use real dishes, glassware and flatware rather than single-service paper or plastic. For cleanup, a full dishwasher conserves water better than handwashing in the sink. Don't pre-rinse...it wastes water and isn't necessary. Use the sanitize cycle to disinfect dishes.

27. When grocery shopping, use mesh draw-string bags for produce rather than the plastic bags in the produce section. They are available online and in housewares stores.

28. When dressing for Zoom parties and FaceTime events, pick your personal care products carefully so you are not using ones containing toxic substances. Look for fragrance-free items. Consider not using nail polish. Check the Environmental Working Group or Silent Spring websites for safe cosmetics, moisturizers, and sunscreens.

29. Environmental organizations for gift memberships: Alliance for a Healthy Tomorrow www.healthytomorrow.org; Mass Audubon www.massaudubon.org; MA Sierra Club www.sierraclubmass.org; Environmental Working Group www.ewg.org; Clean Water Action www.cleanwateraction.org; Natural Resources Defense Council www.nrdc.org; Mothers Out Front www.mothersoutfront.org; Silent Spring www.silent.spring.org; Grow Native MA www.grownativemass.org; Native Plant Trust www.nativeplanttrust.org

30. Books for gift-giving: The Omnivore's Dilemma by Michael Pollan

Native Plants for New England Gardens, by Richardson and Jaffe

Bringing Nature Home and Nature's Best Hope by Doug Tallamy

Roses for New England: Guide to Sustainable Rose Gardening, Mike/Angelina Chute

Good Bug, Bad Bug: Who's Who...and How to Manage Them Organically, Jessica Walliser

Healthy Soils for Sustainable Gardens. Brooklyn Botanic Garden All-Region Guides. 2009. Amazon.