

Eco-Friendly Holiday Ideas with Mother Nature in Mind

by Maria Bartlett Environmental Awareness Chairperson, GCFM Inc.

The holidays can be a time of excess...food, gifts, travel, decorations, parties! For example, studies show that Americans generate 25% more trash between Thanksgiving and New Year's Eve than during the rest of the year! But wait! We can take steps to make the holidays eco-friendly without taking anything away from the wonderful spirit of the season. Sustainability is possible when we all shop, gift and celebrate with the environment in mind. Consider the following ideas:

Shopping and Gift-giving:

1. Shop smart--buy locally and consolidate shopping trips to save on gas. Many downtowns have special holiday nights...they are fun and create a sense of community. Search local stores for items that are organic and/or free trade. For example, check out Taza Chocolate, locally produced in Somerville, MA
2. Consider giving the gift of indoor plants...something nice to add cheer in winter. The green color of nature is soothing and reduces stress.
3. Comparison shop online and consolidate purchases so they can be shipped together, saving gas on delivery trips.
4. Buying water in plastic bottles may be convenient but it is wasteful, and all that plastic is harmful to the environment. Give a gift of a stainless-steel water bottle that can be filled with tap water. If there are taste/safety concerns about the 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 or silicone straws!
5. Give a programmable thermostat so the heat can be turned down automatically in the winter when you are asleep or away. They also work in the summer to turn up the temperature to save on the power used to run A/C. Gift a nice sweater and warm slippers to add warmth when the thermostat is lower, and a fan to circulate air for cooling in the summer when the thermostat is higher.
6. Give gifts that do not use batteries or give a battery charger with rechargeable batteries.
7. A tire pressure gauge makes a great gift for less than \$10. Correctly inflated tires can save 20% at the gas pump-important since lower gas usage reduces CO2 emissions that cause global warming. Add a gift certificate for a spring wheel alignment...that saves MPG, also saving on emissions.
8. Out shopping? Drive slowly... less than 60mph saves gas. And, don't idle while waiting for a parking space at the mall or at the ATM.... turn off the car if you are idling for longer than 30 seconds. Even with emission-control devices on our cars, there are air pollutants in exhaust!
9. Create gifts grouped around a theme:
 - Programable thermostat, silk long underwear, a fleece shirt and a draft snake.
 - Omnivore's Dilemma, a vegetarian cookbook, and a canning jar of a layered bean soup mix.*
 - 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.
 - Free trade coffee and a French press, with organic chocolates and teas.
 - A HEPA vacuum cleaner, a shoe rack and slippers to keep outdoor pollutants outside.

- A rubber or stainless-steel hose (to replace the toxic phthalates in the vinyl ones), gift certificate with seed catalogues and a soil test kit.
- A tire pressure gauge and certificates to a car wash—uses less water than the home version.
- A gift certificate to a garden center and a book about native plants to buy there.
- A LED flashlight and LED lightbulbs.
- A countertop compost pail, outdoor compost bin and a book about composting.
- A set of glass or silicone storage containers to replace the plastic ones.
- A set of soup bowls, a mason jar layered dried bean soup mix* and a set of cloth napkins.

10. Gardening items for the gardener: a countertop compost crock and/or a compost bin. Give a certificate for a soil test ([UMASS does the tests for a modest cost](#)) or a home 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.

11. Gift battery-operated rechargeable electric yard equipment to replace gas models for better health, quiet and eco-friendliness. Some libraries lend out such items to try out!

12. 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.)

13. Reuse/Recycle/Regift! Find quality not-new items from antique shops, consignment stores, yard sales, thrift shops or your own bookshelf, attic or basement. For example: combine a set of glass beer mugs you never use with a 6-pack of a specialty beer; a cast iron frying pan from a thrift shop—cleaned and seasoned; flowerpots with cuttings from your own garden or house plants; or gently used/almost new books from the library book sale or your own bookcase. Or arrange to have someone's treasured item repaired.

14. 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 you received from past years to use as gift tags. Consider sending electronic greeting cards to reduce paper waste.

15. Give activities and events rather than "stuff." Gift certificates for shows, movies, online cooking classes, and take-out dinners are great ideas!

16. 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.

17. Give the gift of a pass to the National Parks...outdoor time in nature is good for everyone's health. Add a book about local trails if your community has such a book.

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

19. Give the gift of your time: an IOU to bake and deliver a special food or meal; teach someone to knit or play tennis; help someone learn how to convert to organic lawn care; offer to weed a garden when spring comes; or teach a computer skill. Give IOUs to children for movies, hikes, or playing games...or passes to opt out of a chore.

20. Arrange for a free energy audit for your friend...contact MASS SAVE at www.masssave.com

21. Give gift certificates for plants that can provide holiday greens in future years: holly, ilex verticillata, yellow and red-twigged dogwood, evergreen trees, Japanese Andromeda, or yellow Chamaecyparis

Holiday activities:

22. 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.

23. Work together on a computer calculation of the family's Carbon Footprint. Go to this link: <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.

Holiday Decorating:

24. Christmas trees: it's best to buy a live tree and plant it after the holidays. Dig the hole for it before while the weather is still warm and the ground is not frozen. Or buy a locally grown cut tree, collected after the holidays by your town and composted. Avoid artificial trees---they are plastic made from fossil fuels, produce lots of CO2 transporting them from China, never break down and often 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 and money!

25. Use greens from your own yard to decorate the house.

26. Decorate your tree/home with home-made items rather than purchased items made of plastic: dried citrus fruit slices, salt dough ornaments in cookie-cutter shapes, strands of cranberries or popcorn, and mini wreaths of tiny pine cones/acorns from your yard. Search online for ideas.

27. Use LED lights for all your holiday decorations...these use 90% less electricity. Even when 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. Avoid those lighted air-inflated plastic figures!

28. 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 and can be asthma triggers for some people. 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, which pollute indoor air.

29. 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, as well as trigger asthma attacks. Instead, use Duraflame or other manufactured logs...much more eco-friendly! Remember to close the fireplace dampers after things have cooled down.

Entertaining:

30. When cleaning your home, use products that do not contain harsh toxic substances such as bleach or ammonia that are asthma triggers. Use white vinegar, water, liquid soap and essential oils of thyme, lemon, grapefruit, and sage to make your own all-purpose cleaner (not for granite, though). Use white vinegar and water for cleaning glass and mirrors. Use baking soda for scrubbing toilets.

Go online to find non-toxic recipes or use Seventh Generation or other non-toxic manufactured cleaning products. Avoid “anti-bacterial” soaps ...use plain soap and water instead. If a disinfectant is needed, go to TURI.org for a list of ones that are safe and effective.

31. To clean sterling silver, place items in a stainless-steel sink or glass bowl, add a piece of aluminum foil and 1 tablespoon baking soda, 1 tablespoon salt and 1 quart of boiling water. Tarnish will disappear...no need to use harsh silver polishes.

32. 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 locally raised chicken or turkey rather than beef, lamb or pork that contribute much more to global warming in their production. Move those “side dishes” into the spotlight. Yum!

Try these Vegetarian and Vegan recipes:

- [40 Vegan Thanksgiving Recipes](#) from Love and Lemons
- [Vegetarian Thanksgiving Recipes](#) from 101 Cookbooks
- [Vegetarian Thanksgiving Recipes](#) from Cookie and Kate
- [65 Vegetarian Thanksgiving Recipes](#) from Bon Appetit
- [Vegetarian Thanksgiving Recipes](#) from The New York Times

33. Food waste makes up to 40% of trash going to landfills and incinerators! Prepare food in smaller quantities to cut down on waste. Eat leftovers! Compost what isn't edible in your own bins or sign up for a compost collection service in your area. (Bootstrap Compost and Black Earth Compost offer such services in many towns.)

34. 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>. Print out the pocket guides for stocking stuffers.

35. Plastic containers/wrap can leach toxic substances into food. And, despite the numbered triangle on the base, most plastics cannot be recycled. Store holiday leftovers in stainless steel, glass, silicone or ceramic containers and never reheat in plastic containers in the microwave. Use paper towels to cover food when reheating in the microwave.

36. For mealtimes, use cloth napkins 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, just scrap leftover food bits off the dishes.

37. 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 grocery stores. And, of course, bring your own bags to use at checkout...a recent ABC investigation found that only 5% of the plastic bags collected for recycling at some grocery stores are ever actually recycled!

38. When dressing for parties and events, pick your personal care products carefully so you are using ones that are free of toxic substances. Look for fragrance-free items. Consider not using nail polish. Check Environmental Working Group (<https://ewg.org>) or Silent Spring Institute (<https://silentspring.org>) websites for safe cosmetics, moisturizers, and sunscreens.

RESOURCES

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.silentspring.org; Grow Native MA www.grownativemass.org; Native Plant Trust www.nativeplanttrust.org; Elders Climate Action <https://www.eldersclimateaction.org/mass-chapter/>

Books for gift-giving/Climate Change:

The Omnivore's Dilemma by Michael Pollan

Our Choice: A Plan to Solve the Climate Crisis by Al Gore.

Cooler Smarter: Practical Steps for Low-Carbon Living by the Union of Concerned Scientists

Low Carbon Diet: a 30-Day Program to Lose 5000 Pounds, David Gershon

How Bad are Bananas? The Carbon Footprint of Everything. by Mike Berners-Lee

A Better Planet: Forty Big Ideas for a Sustainable Future, by D. Esty

Secondhand: Travels in the New Global Garage Sale, by Adam Minter

The Rough Guide to Green Living, by Duncan Clark

The Parents' Guide to Climate Revolution by Mary DeMocker

The Live Earth: Global Warming Survival Handbook, David de Rothschild

The Green Book: The Everyday Guide to Saving the Planet One Step at a Time, Rogers/Kostigen

Books for gift-giving/Eco-gardening:

Native Plants for New England Gardens, by Richardson and Jaffe

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

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

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

The Organic Lawn Care Manual, Paul Tukey

Planting in a Post-Wild World, Claudia West

Brooklyn Botanic Garden well-regarded Handbook Series (www.bbg.org) \$12.95 each

Healthy Soils for Sustainable Gardens

Edible Gardens

A Kid's Guide to Exploring Nature

Gardening with Children

The Climate Conscious Gardener

Great Natives for Tough Places

Native Perennials, North American Beauties

Attracting Native Pollinators: Protecting North America's Bees and Butterflies by The Xerces Society

***Cloth Gift Bag** sewing directions: Search online for youTube videos for “Drawstring Gift Bags.”

***Mason Jar Bean Soup Mix:** <https://masonjarrecipe.com/34-mason-jar-dry-soup-mixes-recipes/>

Maria Bartlett maria_bartlett@verizon.net