

Waste Not, Want Not: Going Green for the Holidays and into the New Year

Amy Rowe, Rutgers Cooperative Extension

The holidays are upon us, and they bring gifts, feasts, and cozy spaces during the cold winter months. All of these things can be draining on the environment, with excess waste and energy usage. Here are some practical ways to celebrate more sustainably during the holidays and throughout 2026.

Sustainable Shopping

Consider shopping in-person. This reduces packaging waste by nearly 5 times compared to online purchases (Kim, 2022). Gifts bought in-person are also less likely to be returned versus online shopping because the shopper can see, touch, and size the product before buying. Don't forget your reusable bag!



Photo credit: Vadym Petrochenko, Getty Images/iStockphoto

Look for gifts that are made with eco-friendly materials such as bamboo, recycled materials, hemp, or organic fabrics. Also, consider gifts that are packaged sustainably with recycled materials, compostable components, or minimal packaging. Consider providing the company with positive feedback to let them know their reduced packaging was an important factor in choosing their product. Companies need to hear from their consumers that the environment is a driving force in their purchasing decisions.

Consider shopping at craft shows, farmer's markets, and local shops that can lead you to distinctive gifts with reduced packaging.

Give the gift of an experience or charitable donation rather than a consumer product. This will reduce packaging, clutter, and waste while providing time spent with loved ones or funds going to a cause that is important to the recipient.

Green Gift Wrapping

Consider wrapping gifts in brown paper (from many online purchases), newspaper, or any saved, reusable wrapping paper from last year.

Put presents in a reusable gift bag or basket that can be reused multiple times.

If you are purchasing new wrapping paper, look for plain, recyclable materials. Shiny foil paper, laminated paper, or paper with glitter are not recyclable and will end up in a landfill. The same applies to gift bags: the simpler the better.

Be sure to only use as much wrapping paper as you need. The New York Department of Environmental Conservation suggests using a piece of string to loop around your package and then laying the string out flat on the paper to measure how much paper you need to cut (dec.ny.gov).

Holiday Decorations

Use LED (light emitting diode) lights around the tree and house for higher efficiency and longer life to reduce energy usage and costs. Put lights on a timer to ensure the lights are on only when needed.

A cut tree is a more sustainable choice, but if you do have an artificial tree, keep it as long as possible before purchasing a new one.

Avoid tinsel and plastic decorations and ornaments, as they are usually not recyclable.

Consider making your own decorations out of plant material such as pinecones, holly, twigs, bark, and evergreen branches.

Holiday Hosting and Green Get-togethers

Cook or bake multiple items in the oven at the same time to take advantage of the space and heat.

Be sure to plan meals based on your headcount to minimize food waste. Provide containers for guests to take food to enjoy at home.

Containerize and eat remaining leftovers or freeze them for later. Consider donating to a food bank. Compost food scraps and anything left to minimize what's heading to the landfill.

Avoid single-use plastic by serving guests with re-usable table settings and utensils. Fill the dishwasher with a full load before running.

Garbage and Recycling

Be sure to recycle old string lights at your big local box store after the holidays.

Check with your municipality or garbage service to see if they pick up real trees for recycling or mulching.

Flatten and remove labels and tape from all those cardboard boxes prior to recycling.

Keep older gently-used items out of the waste stream by taking them to a local thrift store or charity.

Dispose of non-working electronics at your town's e-waste events or find a mail-back program with an e-waste recycler. Lithium-ion batteries should not be placed in regular garbage or recycling.

Conclusion

The holidays are a busy and often stressful time of year, but hopefully you can use some of these tips to practice sustainability amidst all the craziness.

The Earth Day Every Day Team appreciates your support over the years, and we wish you a happy holiday and very happy 2026!

Resources

www.neefusa.org/story/sustainability/give-gift-planet-reducing-holiday-waste

dec.ny.gov/environmental-protection/recycling-composting/waste-reduction/sustainable-holidays

www.screrra.org/how-to-reduce-waste-and-recycle-right-during-the-holidays/

www.nbcnews.com/better/lifestyle/cut-down-holiday-waste-these-recycling-tips-ncna1097221

Reference

Kim Y, Kang J, Chun H. Is online shopping packaging waste a threat to the environment? *Economics letters*. 2022;214. doi:10.1016/j.econlet.2022.110398