

Greener holidays

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Dear EarthTalk: What are some ideas for being greener this holiday season?

-- *Beth Livingston, Camden, NJ*

While the holidays are festive and fun, they can take a toll on the environment. All that shopping, decoration, food preparation and travel adds up to more carbon emissions and more waste. But there are ways to minimize our impact and still celebrate the season in grand style.

For starters, buy fewer gifts. Homemade, personal gifts are always appreciated as much or more than something store-bought. Paint a painting, bake a cake, or make a playlist of favorite songs. EarthEasy.com recommends giving services instead of goods to cut down on the materialism of the holidays: "A great gift could be an hour's massage at a local spa, or music lessons for a budding musician." Other service gift ideas include childcare or tutoring, dog walking, cooking, window-washing, a car wash and vacuum or even Internet/computer lessons. Another way to cut down on the amount of stuff passing under your tree is by having a Secret Santa exchange among grown-ups so that every adult doesn't have to get gifts for several others.

Another way to save energy and waste is to tone down the holiday decorating, especially with regard to lighting. A 2008 report commissioned by the Department of Energy found that holiday lighting across the U.S. uses up some six terawatt-hours of electricity per year, which is equivalent to the total electricity consumption of half a million homes in a month. If you do still decide to indulge in holiday lights, try to go LED. The smaller "light emitting diode" bulbs don't get hot to the touch (and are less likely to start a fire) and consume a fraction of the electricity of their incandescent predecessors while lasting 10 times longer. HolidayLEDs.com gives customers who recycle their old holiday lights with them a voucher for 15 percent off a new order of LED lights.

Believe it or not, your choice of a Christmas tree affects your environmental footprint as well. *The Epoch Times*

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reports that artificial trees are not necessarily the answer, as most are made out of petrochemicals, PVC, metals or sometimes even lead, and can't usually be recycled so end up in landfills after a few years of useful life. Furthermore, some 80 percent of artificial trees are made in China, meaning shipping them on trucks, railways and container ships uses a lot of fuel and emits a lot of carbon dioxide accordingly.

Getting a real tree, preferably one that is organic and sustainably harvested by a local tree farmer, is a better choice. After all, real trees provide habitat for wildlife while they are growing, and they filter dust and pollen out of the air while producing oxygen and absorbing carbon dioxide. *The Epoch Times* adds that typically one to three tree seeds are planted for every Christmas tree harvested in the U.S. And if you get a potted (living) Christmas tree, you can keep it for years after the holidays pass, either in its pot (or a bigger one as it grows) or in the ground outside.

Of course, another way to keep your carbon footprint down over the holidays is by just staying home. A third of the carbon emissions we generate in our daily lives come from driving our cars, so why not stay off the roads over the holidays? And air travel is one of the biggest carbon splurges any of us indulge in, so not jetting across the country to visit in-laws might be the best environmental action you take all year.

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