



BY

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Sustainable Holidays

Embrace the three R's for eco-friendly celebrations

BY DEBRA STEVCO MILLER

Around the 1940s, consumerism eventually produced a “throw-away society” that subscribed to an easier lifestyle by ridding disposable items after a single use. Coffee pods, fast fashion, and even paper towels now contribute to the carbon footprint as goods that end up in a landfill.

So, while we try to do what’s best for the environment whenever we can, what is your personal sustainability plan for the holidays?

If this is a new thought, it might feel a bit strange at first but having an eco-friendly mindset is a good step toward a more sustainable way to live in our climate-changing world. Whether decorating for Christmas, Kwanzaa, Hanukkah, or any holiday festivity, there are many great craft ideas on social media that are fun for kids and adults that provide a valuable opportunity to learn how to better care for the environment by considering the three R's of waste management: reduce, reuse, and recycle.

Some ideas might be to create a fragrant biodegradable wreath using twine and nature’s bountiful selection of sticks and fallen evergreen branches; string aromatic dried orange slices; tie cinnamon sticks to

pine cones as ornaments; wrap gifts with old scarves or pages from a colorful magazine; collect greenery to use as table runners; shape earth-friendly rattan into creative designs; cut old tee shirts into strips and tie into bows around a wreath form; paint ornaments from wood remnants and add a bit of colored sand or hole-punched paper for sparkle.

Some people are just a natural talent when it comes to crafts. You probably know a certain someone who can take whatever is available and transform it into something extraordinary. Ask them for a few tips.

Next year, sign up for the New Jersey Audubon workshop in early December on how to create natural wreaths, table decorations, or garland using compostable materials with a grape vine base and foraged evergreen sprigs.

Before buying anything new, consider that thrift retailers like Goodwill and Habit for Humanity ReStores carry lots of holiday décor and gifts so plan a visit there this week before all the good stuff disappears.

Even the Island Heights Environmental Committee in Ocean County undertakes their own holiday nature project each year.

“We usually do the wildlife tree,” said Tanara Hall, committee vice chairperson, “decorating outdoor trees with edible ornaments for birds.”

Speaking of which, how about bringing a wildlife tree indoors for Christmas this year? For over 50 years there has been a growing trend to have a live tree that, come January, is planted in your yard or landscaping. Think of it as doing your part for local reforestation.

However, if you purchase a cut tree, consider composting it or recycling it for mulch with your municipality. Have an artificial tree? Get at least four years of use from it and then possibly donate it as a philanthropic good deed instead of adding it to the trash.



Start the countdown to Christmas with a homemade advent calendar.

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Another eco-friendly move would be energy-efficient LED lights for your home, which save 75% energy, or light strings that are solar-powered which use zero energy, or even rechargeable ones to help reduce the environmental impact. In addition, using timers will ensure lights won't be on around-the-clock. After the holidays, some hardware stores or towns will accept used light strings for recycling, too.

Also, thoughtful presents such as experiences, charitable donations, local classes, a park outing, and gifts of time are all good ideas for helping to cut back on material items which contribute to greenhouse gas emissions during manufacturing and then eventually end up in the garbage.

"Each year we throw out tons of excess paper and gift wrapping materials," said Anjuli Ramos-Busot, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club, which practices and promotes the responsible use of the earth's ecosystems and resources. "Opt-out of unnecessary plastic wrapping and choose to purchase zero-waste gifts when possible. The holidays are a critical time for us to practice thoughtful consumerism and sustainability and be mindful of our impact on the environment."

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, in 2018 about 94 million tons of municipal solid waste were recycled or composted, meaning that those materials were diverted from the landfill and instead could be used as a material resource. Yay! Unfortunately, those 94 million tons represent only a 32% recycling rate. Ugh!

Maybe everything you need for the holidays is already in your yard, somewhere in your home, can be borrowed from a friend, or available at a local shop. The planet will thank you. Happy Holidays! ❖

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