

Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

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Greening Your Holidays, On a Budget

Dear EcoGirl: Are there ways that I can celebrate the winter holidays cheerfully while treading lightly on both the earth and my wallet? *Signed, Skimping in Rio Nido*

Dear Skimping: Yes, you can create greener holidays — and save money too!

In fact, for all the unfortunate pain and suffering of this current economic downturn, it does potentially carry an ecological silver lining. Our culture's reckless drive for growth has literally been devouring our planet. So perhaps today's financial difficulties can actually help us lower our consumption levels to better match the earth's capacity.

We can all encourage that outcome by looking for ways to buy just what we need, prioritize quality over quantity, avoid waste, and be efficient with energy.

Here are some ways to apply these principles in honoring your loved ones, the planet, and your finances this holiday season.

- **Decorate with nature's beauty.** Bring nature inside to create a holiday mood, save money, and reduce manufacturing pollution and waste. How does your backyard inspire your creativity? Perhaps invite friends and family to join you in exploring nature's art. With branches of bright red maple leaves, dried Queen Anne's Lace, pine cones and boughs, and colorful squash and fruits, you can make attractive seasonal centerpieces, front door wreaths, and mantelpiece decor. String your holiday tree with popcorn and cranberries. After the festivities, offer what's left to the birds and the compost pile.

- **Fill your home with natural scents.** Replace commercial scents and their mystery ingredients (often toxic petrochemicals) with diluted essential oils in a spray bottle; fresh flowers in a vase; or aromatic herbs such as cinnamon simmering in water or thrown in the fireplace. Much better!

- **Choose affordable earth-friendly gifts.** Reduce eco-impact by looking for items that are energy-efficient, minimally-packaged, locally-made, sustainably-harvested, less-toxic, natural, organic, fair-trade, "previously-owned," recycled, or recyclable. (Read labels to understand and confirm green claims.)

Buying our wonderful local organic food and wine "direct from the source" cuts your costs, connects folks with our home-grown treasures, and supports healthier local agriculture. You can also save money by exploring consignment shops for gently-used clothing, toys, and more. Refurbish a "previously-owned" household item to personalize your gift-giving.

Homemade almost-anything let's you make it organic and local. Food is always appreciated, but consider sharing your other passions too. For instance, one year my love of herbs became gifts of custom herbal scrubs and sachets.

- **Trim your giftee's everyday eco-footprint and expenses.** Look at their daily activities to discover useful gifts, such as: A refillable Thermos for coffee or tea (to replace purchased beverages and Styrofoam cups); a battery charger and rechargeable batteries (to avoid buying new batteries and reduce toxic waste); cloth napkins (instead of paper ones); or an organic fruit tree (which brings delicious dividends throughout the years).

- **Avoid cheap throwaway items.** Even if these are inexpensive to buy (because of our short-sighted economic system), they're costly to the earth in resources extracted, energy used, and landfill space.

- **Shop ecologically.** Go with a friend to save gas costs and increase camaraderie. Bring a cloth bag or consolidate purchases into one bag.

- **Improve your wrap.** Choose recycled and chlorine-free wrapping papers. Or cover packages with magazines, comics, sports pages, old maps,

fabric, even brown paper bags stamped with pretty images and tied with raffia. Decorate packages or paper bags with leaves, twigs, and flowers.

- **Give the gift of meaningful experiences.** Easy low-impact presents that nurture your relationships can include: a coupon for an evening babysitting, a day helping clean out the garage, a pre-paid class registration, cookie-making lessons, a massage gift certificate, theater tickets, or a night out on the town. For extra points, choose a green activity. (Hmmm, perhaps an organic facial....)

- **Discard responsibly.** Setup an easy system for guests to help recycle holiday trash. Recycle foam shipping "peanuts" at most private mail centers. Keep toxics out of landfills by recycling your old techno-toys, including computers, TVs, phones, etc. Save wrapping paper and ribbons for next year's reuse. Don't burn wrapping paper; it can contain toxic metals. It's OK to recycle non-metallic ones. More recycling information is at (www.recyclenow.org) and in the Recycling Guide in your Yellow Pages.

With just a little creativity, we can truly make this a season of love for all. For more eco-holiday ideas, see (www.healthyworld.org/ecoholidays.html).

Ask EcoGirl is written by Patricia Dines, Author of The Organic Guide to Sonoma, Napa, & Mendocino Counties, and Editor and Lead Writer for The Next STEP newsletter.

Email your questions about going green to <EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info> for possible inclusion in future columns. View past columns at <www.AskEcoGirl.info>. Also contact EcoGirl for information about carrying this syndicated column in your periodical. "EcoGirl believes that we can all be a superhero for the planet. Then she shows you how!"

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