

Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

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Trimming Your Holiday Waste

Dear EcoGirl: How can our family reduce the trash we generate during the holidays? *Signed, Overflowing*

Dear Overflowing: Thanks for your great question. Yes, America's waste stream is 25% higher between Thanksgiving and New Year's, so this is a vital and fruitful time for us to cut back.

Did you know that since 2005 Sonoma County has been hauling 6,000 tons of garbage weekly to out-of-county sites? The recent and ongoing drama over how to reopen our county's dump is just one example of the many problems we can avoid by creating less trash.

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

The easiest way to trim your trash (and overall eco-impact) is to practice the 3 Rs in everything you do.

So remember: **Reduce** what you buy, **Reuse/Repair** what you can, then **Recycle** responsibly. Also **buy recycled and used** items to complete the loop and support the reuse market.

Seasonal Tips

Here are some specific ways you can cut your holiday waste.

Entertaining & food

- **Buy a potted Christmas tree.** After the holidays are done, you can plant it outside to enhance your property.
- **Label your recycling container** with what goes in there, so that guests can help recycle and lighten your load.
- **Buy food from bulk bins** to reduce packaging waste, save money, and get only what you need.
- **Set your table with washable plates, cups, silverware, and napkins.** If you use plastics, wash them for later reuse.
- **Compost food scraps** in your home pile or via your green can. Most foods can go in, except meat, bones, cheese, and oil. Don't put in plastic or bio-bags.

Greeting cards

- **Choose recycled paper cards.** Avoid glitter and foil, as these aren't recyclable.
- **Create unique and personalized cards** by cutting images from magazines or last year's cards, then pasting them onto blank cards. Even add embellishments!

- **Email online "e-cards"** when possible.

Gift giving

- **Offer experiences rather than products**, such as: A massage gift certificate, a pre-paid class registration, theater tickets, a coupon for babysitting, cookie-making lessons, or a day helping clean out the garage.
- **Bring your own bag for shopping**, or accumulate purchases into one bag.
- **Buy gifts that are:** Durable, minimally packaged, used, recycled, and recyclable. Also help your giftees trim waste by giving them a commuting mug, battery recharger, or attractive cloth bag.

Gift wrapping

- **Buy wrapping paper that's recycled and chlorine-free.** Avoid metallics as they can't be recycled.
- **Purchase and reuse holiday-themed cloth and paper gift bags.**
- **Reuse ribbon and bows;** most can't be recycled.
- **Wrap creatively**, for instance with magazines, comics, sports pages, maps, fabrics, even paper bags. Kids can help decorate with stamps and drawings. Tie packages and bags with compostable raffia, twine, twigs, leaves, or flowers.
- **Choose wrapping alternatives.** For instance, tie sewing supplies with a measuring tape, wrap kitchen utensils in a kitchen towel, and gather bath treats in a pretty storage basket.

After the festivities

- **Save wrapping paper, ribbons, and cards** for reuse next year.
- **Recycle foam "peanuts"** at a private mail center.
- **Drop unneeded shopping bags** at a thrift store for reuse.
- **Recycle non-metallic holiday cards and wrapping paper** in your blue recycling can, along with glass, cans, cardboard, paper, and most plastic.
- **Put your Christmas tree in the green can**, after removing decorations and cutting it to fit fully inside. Or call the Eco-Desk (565-3375) for more about their tree recycling options during the first half of January.
- **Donate old toys, clothes, and more**, to brighten someone's day while making

better use of the embedded resource costs. Quality discards can go to a consignment store, netting a little cash.

- **Donate and recycle electronic items**, including phones, computers, TVs, and other gadgets. Keep these out of the trash as their toxics leach from landfills and poison people, wildlife, and ecosystems. A great place to donate is the Computer Recycling Center (Santa Rosa, www.crc.org, 570-1600). You can also recycle through all Sonoma County Refuse Disposal Sites and some curbside services.

For more information

- **Sonoma County Eco-Desk.** Find local recycling, donation, and disposal details on their website and the recycling section of the AT&T Yellow Pages (under "R"). www.recyclenow.org, 565-3375
- **Book: Choose to Reuse**, by Nikki & David Goldbeck. Wonderful ideas and resources for repair and reuse.
- **Online: The Story of Stuff.** This popular video engagingly illuminates the eco-cost built into every product we buy, inspiring responsible action. Share it with friends! www.storyofstuff.com
- **Projects: Zero waste.** Encourage cultural redesign that avoids waste by designing materials either for reuse or to harmlessly return to the earth. www.crra.com/grc/articles/zwc.html
- **My online copy of this article** has more tips and specifics for reducing waste, giving green gifts, finding used goods locally, consigning items locally, and composting at home. www.patriciadines.info/EcoGirl3d.html

I hope these ideas help you walk gently on the earth this holiday season.

Ask EcoGirl is written by Patricia Dines, Author of The Organic Guides, and Editor and Lead Writer for The Next STEP newsletter. Contact EcoGirl with your questions about going green, or for information about carrying this syndicated column in your periodical. Also see "Ask EcoGirl" on Facebook! "EcoGirl: Encouraging the eco-hero in everyone."

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Published in the *Sonoma County Gazette*, December 2009.

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