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Christmas with a conscience

Reduce, reuse and recycle for a greener season

BY DAWN WEINBERGER

The Portland Tribune Dec 7, 2006

Santa Claus is coming to town, and he's bringing a sleigh full of wrapping paper, boxes and packing peanuts. And while his reindeer aren't powered by gasoline, his annual visit nonetheless puts excess strain on the environment.

"People tend to be more wasteful around the holidays," says Dresden Skees-Gregory, sustainability coordinator for Portland State University. "And the more stuff we use, the more we're depleting what is left."

Paper and packing materials are just the tip of the iceberg – there also are holiday lights, air travel, road trips, excess trash and the tendency to purchase food and gifts shipped in from afar.

In the Portland area alone, garbage increases by about 25 percent during the holiday season, says Jan O'Dell of Metro. And homes typically use about 1,100 kilowatt-hours of power in December, compared to 900 in an average month, says Mark Whitney, lighting specialist for Portland General Electric.



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In lieu of a Christmas tree, Betty Shelly decorates her house with pinecones and greenery she finds outdoors.



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Despite the startling stats, we don't have to choose between Christmas cheer and eco-consciousness. Just ask Betty Shelly of Southwest Portland. For nearly a decade, she and her husband, Jon, have made sustainability a focal point of their holiday celebrations. And they have more fun because of it. Instead of filling an entire corner of a room with gifts, they throw parties.

"We entertain a lot instead of rushing around (at the mall)," Betty Shelly says. "We do caroling parties and sit around and tell stories around the fire."

The Shellys also strive to give gifts of experience, like tickets to special events, rather than material items wrapped up in big boxes with tissue, shiny paper and bows. In lieu of a cut tree, their home is decorated with fallen greenery that Shelly gathers herself, and food for special meals comes primarily from local farmers markets.

"I try to limit whatever comes into my house," she says. "It's really easy for people to think 'It's recyclable, so it's OK.' But reduction is better."

The Shellys clearly have this concept down. For those who are just starting to embrace the idea of an ecofriendly holiday season, here's a primer.

Light up your life

Though holiday lights tax the power grid, total elimination isn't necessary, Whitney says. Just find lights that are more efficient – namely, LED lights. LED stands for light-emitting diode, and the bulbs use "significantly less energy than the large incandescent ones," he says.

LEDs cost more upfront (a strand of 100 white LEDs goes for about \$30; a strand of 150 multicolored twinkling incandescents will only set you back about \$10), but Whitney says the operational cost is far less – 16 extra cents to run 280 LEDs during the holidays, compared to \$9.34 for C-7 incandescents. Plus they'll last through several seasons, while the others burn out more quickly (and often end up in the landfill).

"They are three or four times more expensive up front, but you'll make it up in four to five years," Whitney says, adding that it's always wise to put lights on a timer and to make sure they're turned off before going to bed.

Wrap it up

Gift wrap is an obvious entry point into the world of holiday sustainability.

"There are a lot of alternative options," says Adrienne Kringen, the Oregon Environmental Council's marketing director, referring to the rolls of wrap sold at the local big box store.

She suggests keeping and reusing gift bags, or investing in fabric bags (these also can be made by hand) – the recipient will consider the bag part of the gift and will probably find a use for it. Other options include decorating grocery bags and brown kraft paper, or finding unlikely items around the house to use as wrap (e.g., the bag your latest sheet set came in).

"I'll use (recyclable) brown kraft paper and spend a little extra on some nice cloth ribbon that can be reused," Kringen says.

If you just can't part with traditional gift wrap, be sure to purchase the recyclable variety – some wrapping paper is made with materials that are either difficult or impossible to recycle, Metro's O'Dell warns.

Over the river ...

Riding a bike or walking to your family's holiday fete isn't always

practical – especially if everyone is gathering at Uncle Larry’s place in upstate New York. If car or air travel is on the agenda, consider purchasing carbon offsets, Kringen suggested.

“Holiday travel has a (big) impact because we are causing more pollution,” she says.

Carbon offsets are essentially credits that go toward reducing an individual’s environmental footprint. For example, if a traveler purchases a \$10 carbon offset along with an airline ticket (at least two major travel Web sites, Expedia and Travelocity, offer this service), the cash goes toward sustainable projects such as the funding of wind farms or solar power.

Offsets also are sold through nonprofits like the Bonneville Environmental Fund (the group refers to them as “green tags”) as well as private companies like the San Francisco-based TerraPass. (Be cautious, however, when purchasing through a private company – not all are transparent about where the money goes.)

Travelers can even determine their individual footprint by entering data, such as travel distance and gas mileage, into a “carbon calculator” available on various Web sites, including the Bonneville Environmental Fund’s.

Beyond curbside

Finally, don’t assume that something can’t be recycled just because curbside pickup service won’t take it.

Metro offers a wealth of information to anyone interested on where and how to recycle various holiday items (like catalogs and trees), along with tips on holiday waste prevention, O’Dell says. (Metro will even tell you where to take all those outdated electronics, should Santa bring a new stereo system and computer.)

Start small

Sound overwhelming?

Those in the know suggest that anyone who isn’t comfortable with the thought of going cold turkey on all the standard holiday activities simply ease in year by year.

“You can only do what you’re ready to do,” Skees-Gregory says. “We don’t want people to suffer through the holidays.”

Find out more

Carbon offsetting

Learn all about carbon offsetting and determine your individual footprint at the Bonneville Environmental Foundation Web site, www.b-e-f.org.

Holiday recycling

Visit www.metro-region.org to find out everything you ever wanted to know about recycling during the holiday season (and into the new year).

Green giftwrap

Google “recycled gift wrap” if you’re looking for, well, recycled (or recyclable) gift wrap. The newspaper or grocery bags work well two too. Several online vendors will show up sell recycled gift wrap.

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