

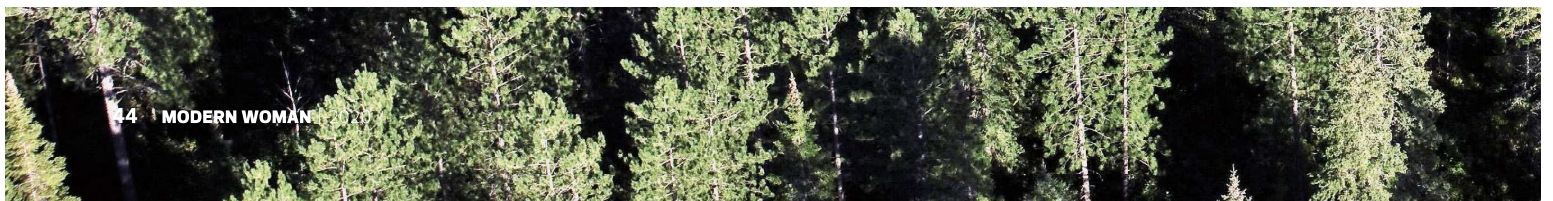


Dreaming OF A GREEN Christmas

Infuse your holidays with
eco-friendly strategies

BY LISA A. BEACH

GETTY IMAGES; RICHARD HAMILTON SMITH/THE NATURE CONSERVANCY





One of the lessons the COVID-19 pandemic has driven home is that the Earth truly is fragile, and our impact — big and small, positive and negative — makes a difference. This holiday season, strive to reduce your environmental footprint with an eco-friendly approach.

How? It starts with the right mindset — and going back to the basics.

“When you’re thinking about greener holidays, go back to reduce, reuse and recycle,” says Darby Hoover, senior resource specialist at Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC).

While the upcoming holidays might indeed look different this year, this might be the perfect time to celebrate in more mindful ways and start eco-friendly traditions to help protect our planet.



RETHINK YOUR HOLIDAY MEALS

Keep the three R’s of sustainability in mind when planning the holiday meals you’ll be making.

According to the NRDC, Americans waste about 40 percent of our food supply.

“We throw away about 80 billion pounds of food every year in the U.S. alone,” says

Stephanie Wear, senior scientist and strategy adviser at The Nature Conservancy (TNC).

Food waste is a problem year-round, but the holidays can present special challenges. Wear suggests thinking more about sustainability, knowing the choices you make really do affect the environment. Her advice? Choose foods that don’t create a lot of greenhouse gas emissions in their production, common in the meat industry, and a big issue regarding climate change.

“Tradition is really important at the holidays, so don’t give them up,” says Wear. “But make meat less of an item on the menu.” For instance, beef or pork might show up on the menu as the centerpiece of your holiday feast, but don’t make it the mainstay at every meal. Perhaps make ham the focal point of your Christmas Day meal but choose pasta or another meatless dish for Christmas Eve dinner.

Worried about wasting food but not sure how much to purchase for your holiday crowd? Hoover suggests using NRDC’s free Guestimator tool ([savethefood.com/guestimator](https://www.savethefood.com/guestimator)). “We have tools that help us produce, consume, shop and store food in ways that wastes less,” explains Hoover. This free tool walks you through what you’re

planning to serve, whether you want leftovers, whether your guests are light or heavy eaters, and then helps you figure out how much food to purchase.

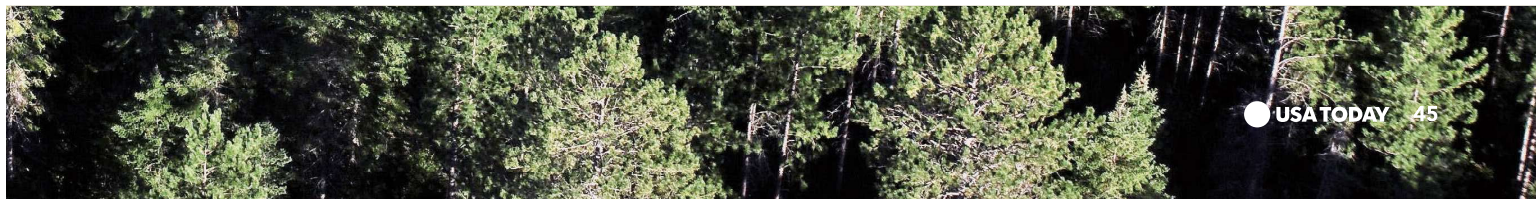
Regardless of what’s on the menu, shop local for your holiday meals and festivities. Buying local supports area farmers, bakers and artisan food makers (think cheese, jams, honey). Plus, because local food doesn’t travel thousands of miles to get to your home, it reduces greenhouse gas-producing fossil fuels used in transportation.



GET SMART WITH YOUR DECORATIONS

If you love the twinkling of festive lights adorning your tree and home during the holidays, consider using LED lights. According to the Department of Energy, LED lights consume roughly 75 percent less energy and last 25 times longer than traditional incandescent lighting. Plus, they’re safe (less heat emitted equals reduced risk of fire) and sturdy (made of epoxy lenses, not glass so they’re less likely to break).

The greenest choice, says Wear, is to stick with the lights you already have if they still work. “It’s not environmentally friendly to buy new lights if your old ones still work,” she says. “But make a better >





choice when you have the option.”

Besides energy-efficient lights, consider DIY decorations. That’s what Sari Fordham of Riverside, Calif., does. “The more environmentally friendly ornaments are made from what we already have in the house,” notes Fordham, who often uses felt, old maps or damaged books. She also creates lovely keepsake ornaments by taking a small toy a child has outgrown (such as a dinosaur), gluing a little Santa hat and ribbon to it, and giving it to the child. “The toys belonged to my nephews,” says Fordham. “They’re teens now and were pretty taken with seeing their old toys as Christmas ornaments.”



BUY (OR RENT) A REAL CHRISTMAS TREE

If you’re deciding between a live tree or an artificial tree, what’s the greener choice? You might be surprised. According to TNC, real Christmas trees are better for the environment than artificial ones. While chemical-laden plastic trees might last longer, they require intensive carbon emissions to manufacture and ship, with most of them (nearly 90 percent) coming

from China. (If you’ve already got an artificial tree, keep using it as long as possible to keep it out of the landfill.)

“People should feel really good about getting a live tree,” says Wear. “But it’s not intuitive because people think they’re killing a tree.” In reality, the tree is usually cut when it’s about 7 years old. During that time, the tree helps purify the air we breathe, protect the land and provide habitats for animals. Also, for every tree purchased, farmers plant one to three seedlings in its place, says the National Christmas Tree Association, making it a renewable resource.

If you’re going to buy a real tree (think Douglas fir or Scotch pine), buy local, which reduces the carbon footprint of transporting the tree from afar. After the holidays, recycle your tree. (Check whether your local municipality offers a holiday tree recycling program. Some even offer curbside pickup.)

You can also adopt or rent a living potted Christmas tree from companies such as Rent a Christmas Tree, The Living Christmas Company and Social Greenery’s Green Tree Project. This allows you to savor the unmistakable scent of a real tree with less fuss and care. After Christmas, simply return the tree for repotting and, eventually, replanting in a permanent location. Although these rental companies currently deliver to limited geographic areas, you might find a local Christmas tree farm that also offers rental options.



REIMAGINE YOUR GIFTING

Instead of giving packaged goods, which will need to be wrapped

and possibly shipped, give recipients experiences such as memberships (to museums or zoos), tickets (to movies or plays), classes (to yoga or cooking sessions) or entrance fees (to national parks or tourist attractions).

“We gave a friend tickets to an online performance for a theater that had to pivot and figure out how to make money virtually,” says Hoover, noting it’s a great way to support businesses trying to stay viable when gathering in large groups is difficult because of the pandemic. “This is an interesting, fun way to look at what’s happening right now and still give something meaningful.”

Fordham celebrates the holidays with her husband and daughter as well as their extended families. About 10 years ago, she persuaded relatives to forego traditional holiday gift-giving for the adults in favor of a white elephant gift-trading game. They imposed a \$15 limit on purchasing a gift and drew numbers to determine the order of people selecting gifts. “The person going first gets to pick a gift, and the next person can steal that gift or choose another and so on,” explains Fordham. “There’s a real point (of pride for choosing a gift that everyone wants.”

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DID YOU KNOW?

If all decorative light strings sold in the United States were ENERGY STAR certified, the energy cost savings would amount to about **\$850 MILLION** each year and **9.9 BILLION POUNDS** of annual greenhouse gas emissions would be prevented, equivalent to the emissions from **940,000 VEHICLES**.

SOURCE:
EnergyStar.gov

Get creative with gift giving — even when you're on the receiving end. Instead of relatives showering her then 2-year-old son with lots of toys, Wear encouraged them to write a letter about their lives, sharing memories and wisdom along the way.



AVOID SINGLE-USE ITEMS FOR ENTERTAINING

While gatherings with family and friends might be smaller this year, you might still be hosting a holiday dinner or Christmas party. Tempted to use Styrofoam plates and plastic cutlery to make cleanup easier? Just say no when it comes to single-use items. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, the United States generated more than 35 million tons of plastic in 2017 and only 8.4 percent of it was recycled. The bulk of plastics ends up in landfills or as pollution on land and in our waterways.

If you're wary about bringing out the good china and silver for your festivities, stock up on an extra set of cutlery, glassware and dishes. You can grab an inexpensive set at a thrift shop or look for sales at a discount department store. And ditch the disposable plastic table covering, too. Just keep an inexpensive fabric tablecloth on hand to be used for parties and toss it in the wash afterward.

With an eco-conscious shift in your thinking and by utilizing some of these sustainable tips, you'll be well on your way to making this a truly green Christmas for your family — and the Earth. ■

Environmental Charities to Support this Holiday Season

You might have a holiday tradition of giving to nonprofits. Or, as an alternative to giving family and friends more "stuff," you might donate to charities in their name. Take a green approach to your giving this year. Consider donating to one of the many local nonprofits that support your own community environment or a charitable organization with a broader mission to protect our planet.

CENTER FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

Works to secure a future for all species hovering on the brink of extinction.

- biologicaldiversity.org

GREEN AMERICA

Aims to harness economic power — the strength of consumers, investors, businesses and the marketplace — to create a just and environmentally sustainable society.

- greenamerica.org

NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL

Works to ensure the rights of all people to clean air, clean water and healthy communities.

- nrdc.org

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY

Develops policies to protect land and water, provides food and water sustainability, and builds healthy cities.

- nature.org

WATER FOR PEOPLE

Helps people bring clean water and sanitation solutions to their communities for generations to come.

- waterforpeople.org

— Lisa A. Beach