

Make the Christmas Season More Meaningful - and Sustainable

Consider making this holiday season far more meaningful by planning your shopping or parties better and, perhaps surprisingly, considering climate change. While it's easy to get caught up in the whirlwind of buying Christmas gifts and planning parties, slowing down to reflect can make the season better and protect the planet.

Plan a Meaningful Holiday Season

It's easy to plunge right in to decorating your home, shopping for Christmas presents and planning parties without thinking about what you're doing and why. Taking time to plan will make the season more meaningful and memorable.

Before starting to shop, talk with friends and family to figure out what really interests them so you can select or make truly meaningful experiences or gifts. Rather than planning big parties and long-distance travel that create stress and harm the planet, consider smaller parties with better meals and taking only trips which create enduring connections.

Decorate with the Planet in Mind

Christmas trees, ornaments, cards and lights are all part of the decorations that make the season special. We can decorate differently and better, though, while also caring for the planet.

Rather than buying new decorations, for instance, we can use what we already have or create our own ornaments from photos, hang beautifully intricate painted pinecones or even buy second-hand ornaments at thrift shops. Enjoying the beauty of nature by decorating with items such as sprigs from trees or bright red Sassafras seeds scattered on the dinner table can cheer up our homes. Christmas lights outside homes in America increase light from cities by 22 percent during the holiday season and can be seen from space, according to NASA, and other countries can be similar. Using fewer lights outdoors and indoors can reduce electricity usage.

Decorating with these ideas can be more beautiful and also protect the environment.

Giving more Meaningful Christmas Presents

While it's easy to get caught up in the buying frenzy of shopping and trying to find perfect gifts for friends and family, start by asking them what they want or looking at their social media pages to discover their interests. Spending time to select experiences or create personalised gifts based on what they like can make the season happier for them and for you. There are plenty of options.

Give outings to museums, excursions to parks or hikes. Bake cookies or pastries. Offer your skills to help with tasks that are difficult for them. Donate to an organisation in your friend's name. Give a membership in a music or theatre organisation. Gift a digital newspaper subscription to expand their horizons. You could even give gifts to others by volunteering at a food bank or buying gifts for people in shelters. The possibilities are almost endless. These virtual, digital, experiential or hand-made gifts can create joy, be meaningful and make Christmas merrier.

If you do buy physical presents, choose things that will last. Rather than buying fast fashion, for instance, select well-made clothes. Consider cooking utensils that last for decades. And look for brands that are repairable or have lifetime guarantees – some actually do exist.

Wrapping presents

When you give presents, or cards explaining virtual gifts, consider alternatives to traditional wrapping paper and gift cards. American families would save enough paper to cover 45,000 football fields if they wrapped just 3 presents in reused materials, according to Stanford University researchers, and the impact in other countries is equally great.

Instead of buying wrapping paper that often cannot be recycled, wrap presents in paper from newspapers, colourful catalogues, maps or extra paper you decorate yourself. Gifts can also be wrapped in used fabrics. Tying presents with string rather than ribbons can cut waste. We can also cut up old cards we received in the past to create gift cards, rather than buying new tags.

Creatively changing how we give gifts can be remarkable and reduce waste.

Eat Better at Holiday Parties and Family Meals

Holiday parties, Christmas dinners and New Year celebrations are also among the many festivities during the season. However, lots of food is wasted. About 40 percent of food purchased in Australia for the festive season ends up in restaurant and food service trash bins, according to research by RMIT, and waste hits similar levels in other countries. Meat-heavy meals also affect climate change, since meat can account for up to 70 per cent of the environmental impact of the entire meal, according to University of Sheffield Fellow Christian Reynolds.

To reduce food waste, start by figuring out the number of guests and making a list of what you need. Cook what you actually need rather than making far too much and consider preparing more plant-based dishes rather than using meat. Buying organic from local farmers can cut about five percent of emissions, according to Wired magazine, and it supports a more sustainable food system. When planning holiday festivities, use plates or cutlery that can be washed. Also make it easy for your guests to recycle.

And although one of the best parts of the holidays can be time with family, consider a virtual celebration as a way to celebrate Christmas or New Year if yours is scattered far and wide. Have everyone dress up for the occasion, enjoy the same foods or drinks in different places, and play games or decorate cookies together.

Doing Christmas Differently can be Better

While simply following familiar holiday patterns might seem easier, it may not actually work as well as we think. Taking time to plan and then changing what we do, with our friends and family as well as the planet in mind, can make the Christmas and New Year season even better.