

Banish Christmas tat and embrace the joy of giving less

With a few little tweaks here and there, you can help the environment – and your pocket – this festive period. By Olivia Lidbury

Most of us are susceptible to overconsumption at Christmas, whether that's overdoing it on the cheese plate, Auntie Barbara's sherry or panic-buying tat for a stocking. But it's the last that is proving problematic. According to the sharing app Olio, 85 per cent of us think that we give too many things at Christmas, and 36 per cent of us will throw away unwanted presents by Boxing Day.

When did we start buying so much, from stockpiling boxes of chocolates decked in wrappers that will never biodegrade, to cheaply produced clothes and plastic toys?

"I used to consume mindlessly, but now when I'm shopping I think: 'Where is this going to go when it's at the end of its life?'" says Tessa Clarke, the co-founder of Olio. "And that encourages me to think differently. It's also become like a sort of game, as it means being more creative with gifts and sourcing things that are unique."

Part of our rampant consumer culture at this time of year is down to Black Friday, which whips us into a discount-deal frenzy. "In America, Black Friday is the kick-off of the holiday season, and the marketing strategies there are punchy and noisy, like they are here," says Laura Roso Vidrequin, the founder of children's resale site Kids O'clock, who was raised in Paris, spent eight years living in New York and has lived in London for the past five. Vidrequin thinks that in her native France, there is a softer approach to ownership: "The culture on the whole there isn't about bingeing and wanting more. And it's not to do with a civil responsibility towards a greener planet, but the desire to have the right product, regardless of whether it's discounted or not."

Inger Breitenstein, the Danish owner of a children's fashion agency, has lived in the UK for more than 20 years. She says: "In my family, we have cut right back: we buy fewer but bigger presents for the people we are celebrating with, and we limit the price. I

think people here feel a need to buy for their entire family, even if they aren't seeing them. In Scandinavia there's a feeling that it's a gift just to be able to get together, whether that's cooking a big meal from scratch or just relaxing. And I think there's more of a crafty element there for people to try to make gifts themselves."

Here, the growing availability of "buy now, pay later" schemes allows us to put off the true cost of Christmas and next-day convenience makes buying things online almost too easy. Is the solution to buy nothing? After last year's pandemic-stripped Christmas, that feels joyless. But there are ways to be more mindful of what we purchase.

Aja Barber, the American, London-based author of *Consumed: The Need for Collective Change: Colonialism, Climate Change & Consumerism*, is focusing on experiential gifts this year, especially

"Tiny little tweaks in our consumer behaviour can make a big impact if we all collectively do it"

when it comes to her niece and nephew in Virginia. "Their mother is always complaining that her house is full of stuff, which she then has to throw out – and that's not a good thing. Whenever I talk to my niece, she always talks about the things she remembers us doing together, like me taking her to a spa or ice skating." Last year, Barber's destination for gifts was the luxury resale fashion platform Vestiaire Collective: "They have things that are new with tags still on, so even if you haven't quite wrapped your head around wearing or giving something that's second-hand, you can find things that are brand new – probably presents that other people have received that they're not that keen on."

The shift in our mindsets should be geared towards progress, not perfec-



tion. "I think it's all about little actions," says Catherine Loveless, the co-founder of London Christmas Tree Rental, which is enjoying "wonderfully crazy" demand for its pot-grown Norway spruce trees, which people borrow and decorate for around three weeks before giving them back. "Tiny little tweaks in our consumer behaviour can actually make a big impact if we all collectively do it." It's now in its fourth year, and rollover customers are preparing to welcome the same tree (which they are encouraged to name) back in their homes as last year. "I think people never knew it could exist as a concept. So that's really been exciting for people to think: 'Of course, let's rent instead.'"

Whether it's shopping second-hand, home-baking gifts or forgoing present-giving in favour of a meal out with friends, "it adds up to enormous change, but also because of the ripple effect that you can have," says Clarke. "Living more sustainably becomes contagious in the best possible way, and when your friends start seeing you do things you inspire them to stop and think and do things differently."

▲ Added value: Jules Haines is a fan of second-hand gifts for her children

► Branching out: Jules likes to create gifts rather than simply buy them



'I think everyone is appreciating the value of something handmade'

Jules Haines is the founder of the Haines Collection (hainescollection.co.uk), a website selling remnants and surplus of luxury wallpaper and fabrics. She lives in Tunbridge Wells with her husband and their two children

I think lockdown has changed a lot of the way that many of us think; people stuck at home looked around and had the time to work out what they need and don't need. As an adult, you realise how you don't actually need so much. I think the past year has also placed value on something that is handmade.

I like to buy local chutneys and jams and I'll top them with a little hat and tie it with ribbon. It's a good alternative to something plastic or single-use to take round to someone who is hosting you.



'My son's gifts will be pre-loved this year'

Ana Rachel Estrougo is the founder of the Octopus Club (theoctopusclub.com), an online marketplace that allows parents to give away or sell pre-loved children's clothing and equipment. She lives in south-west London with her husband and their son, Max, three

Max is obsessed with his wooden train track; it all started with a Brio starter kit that my mum bought him for his first birthday. I have found more pieces from eBay and our local charity shop – they sell out almost instantly on the Octopus Club – to add to his collection as his Christmas gift. Buying in advance is key for getting the best pre-loved stuff, it's like a process of discovery and when you find something great it feels a bit like you've won the lottery! Instead of wrapping it I will create a huge track configuration in the middle of the living room on Christmas Eve, so that when he wakes up he will be amazed and can play with it straight away. Of course my son adores plastic toys, but I won't buy them unless they are second-hand. I think wooden toys make lovely second-hand gifts for children: stacking towers, shape sorters, bricks and puzzles.

I'm Brazilian and with my extended family we do a Secret Santa so that we have to buy only one gift, but we can make it a big-ticket item. We don't do stockings there, so Max doesn't have one. With my husband's family, who are British, we decided a few years ago not to do gifts for the adults and just focus on the children. As I don't see Max's aunts that often I don't want to start dictating what they can and cannot get him, so they're free to give him whatever they like.

People shouldn't feel pressured into thinking it's all-or-nothing when it comes to shopping sustainably, because it's impossible to be perfect. When I started making changes myself, it got addictive and I wanted to do it more.



▲ Early starter: Ana Rachel Estrougo says buying in advance is key with her son's gifts



For Christmas this year we've made baubles with leftover wallpaper and instead of having tinsel we've used upholstery trims. If you're not super crafty, try wrapping a gift up with a tea towel and tying it with string, so then you've covered the gift with something useful the giftee will definitely reuse – you can never have too many tea towels. On the first weekend in December, my children and I go to local woods and collect broken branches and holly, which we use to create a centrepiece.

This year, I am going to attempt my own crackers, and I'll fill them with small gifts that people actually want. I'm really into second-hand gifts for my children but I try to balance it. Relatives often contribute to their piggy banks for special occasions, so they have money to spend when we go up to London for the day. They value the experience of being in a really beautiful shop such as Hamleys and buying something to treasure – which somebody after them will get to use.

8 CONSIDERED WAYS TO A LESS WASTEFUL CHRISTMAS

1

Collect wish lists
“Don't be afraid to ask loved ones if there's anything in particular that they'd like to receive,” says Milda Mitkute, the founder of pre-loved marketplace Vinted. “This also works the other way around.”

2

Don't leave it until the last minute
Some 34 per cent polled by Olio said the pressure of trying to buy new things for those in their lives was overwhelming, and they often made last-minute purchases they later regretted.

3

Buy a pot-grown tree
Pot-grown trees can live in the garden and be brought back in year-on-year – check out lovechristmastree.com or christmasonthehill.co.uk. For little ones, Holly Berry Trees (hollyberrytrees.com) delivers mini trees with decorations and “reindeer poop” (compost).

4

Rethink your gift wrap
The Japanese tradition of furoshiki – wrapping gifts in cloth – is gaining momentum here. Raid any scrap linen you have. Newspaper and brown paper recycle easily – elevate a package with string or ribbon and a sprig of foraged greenery.

5

Borrow it
Whether that's chairs from your neighbour, an outfit for the 25th (look up By Rotation or Hurr Collective) or a tablescape (Lay London has Instagrammable settings to hire). Apps such as Olio and Nextdoor, and Facebook groups make connecting easy.

6

Make your own crackers
Use loo roll inners and buy cracker snappers, or source a set of “fill your own” and personalise the contents. A key ring, nail polish or bar of soap will always be gratefully received.

7

Repurpose your decorations
Mine Pinterest for upcycling inspiration – such as dipping baubles into paint or making garlands out of ribbons.

8

Gift pre-loved items
Look up sites such as Shpock, Depop and Vinted. Popular items to be gifted second-hand include books, clothing and toys.



▲ Competition time: Tessa Clarke says board games are liked on Olio's 'Borrow' section

'I'd be delighted for a neighbour to borrow what I don't need this Christmas'

Tessa Clarke is the co-founder of Olio, an app which enables users to list unwanted food, items or clothing and have it claimed by people locally wishing to collect it. She lives in Wiltshire with her husband and two children

The great thing about being mindful of food waste at Christmas is that it saves you money. When I'm making my roast, I will calculate exactly what I need, right down to the number of potatoes per person, and add it all up. I'd advise anyone feeling the pinch or wanting to spend more on experiences or gifts simply to count up whom you're catering for – it's really effective. Another simple hack is to consider the size of your plates; research shows that if peo-

ple serve up on big plates, more food gets wasted.

Getting creative with leftovers is fun but I've discovered that you can freeze an entire roast dinner; it's wonderful to pull it out of the freezer on a lazy Sunday in January. You can also freeze leftover wine in jam jars: white is great for pouring into a risotto and red hearties up a stew.

If I'm going to someone's house I'll make chocolate truffles to take round, they are so easy – I just google a recipe and they are done in 15 minutes. Over time, I've got creative with what I dust them in and experiment with adding Baileys or brandy. I put them in a box with tissue paper and it makes them look unique. People love them.

So many of us are groaning about having too much clutter yet someone two doors down is buying the very same clutter so why not pool resources? On the Olio app we have just launched a “Borrow” section. Books and board games are proving popular; I've just listed my serving platters, which I would be delighted for a local family to borrow rather than go out and buy. This act of sharing creates a wonderful doorstep connection within a community – I've just lent someone a book and I can't wait to chat to them about it when they come to return it.



Alternative gift ideas

Subscriptions

Aja Barber enjoys gifting digital subscriptions of a loved one's favourite magazine or newspaper. “There are all sorts of ways that we can spend and give without focusing on material possessions,” she says.

Memberships

For a gift that keeps on giving, consider museum passes (Art Fund offers 50 per cent off entry at galleries nationwide), memberships to the National Trust or English Heritage, or for young families, unlimited entries to local days out such as farms or play centres.

Experiences

“A meal, massage or movie are always popular with my friends and family,” says Tessa Clarke. If the giftee has young children, throw in the offer of babysitting and let them enjoy an uninterrupted afternoon tea or a trip to the hair salon.

Charitable donations

The charity Choose Love (choose.love) allows you to buy tangible essentials for people in need, including a hot meal, a bundle for an Afghan refugee or a training kit to help a displaced adult find a new vocation in order to support themselves.

Make it

While away an afternoon making bath bombs or slime with children, which you can then present in jam jars. Ditto tray bakes of a relative's favourite cake, which are easy to post if well wrapped.

