

LOW WASTE GIFT GIVING FOR THE HOLIDAYS!

By Laura Isabel Serna (Class of Fall 2023)

When I was a child, I associated the holidays, Christmas in the case of my family, with lots and lots of boxes wrapped in brightly colored paper and decorated with giant bows. Our family opened presents on Christmas Eve, after mass. Kids began youngest to oldest and then the rest of the family. A good year was a year in which you could buy everyone a gift, sometimes even two. This portion of the evening required huge garbage bags to throw away boxes, wrapping, and bows. Sometimes my grandmother would insist on keeping a particularly nice piece of ribbon, promising she would reuse it the following year. But in general gift-giving generated piles and piles of trash. I think this is a common part of holiday celebrations in the United States, but as I've gotten older and more thoughtful about the role of consumerism in my life and that of my daughter, I've searched out ways to make the holidays less about "stuff" and more about experiences.



That being said, I love to give and receive gifts, so I've spent some time thinking about how to reduce the amount of waste my gift-giving produces. Reduction can take the form of reducing the number of gifts you give, being creative or thoughtful about how and where you buy gifts and using recycled or recyclable wrapping and decorations for the gifts you do give. Below are some of the strategies that I've used to keep the holidays merry while reducing their impact on the planet.

To this day my daughter receives four gifts from me at Christmas time: something she wants; something she needs; something to wear; something to read. In other words, she receives a gift that she has been longing for (headphones, a watch); a gift that fulfills a need she has (sometimes socks, last year a new pillow); a gift of clothing or shoes (sometimes this gift ticks both the first boxes; sometimes it's thrifted); and because we love to read in our house, a book. I did not invent this--it likely crossed my path via an online article from a parenting website—but I love it. It helps me manage expectations and puts some boundaries around how much I will spend and what types of items I will buy. If you are having a gathering of family or friends you might consider picking names so everyone buys a gift for one other person or having a white elephant gift exchange in which wrapped mystery gifts get selected and possibly poached by another guest, again each guest only has to bring one gift!

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Another way to reduce waste when giving holiday gifts is to buy local! Not only does this help small businesses in your neighborhood, support a local craftsman, or boost your local BestBuy's sales numbers but it cuts down on shipping boxes and on the environmental cost of long-distance, rapid shipping. You might also consider looking for unique, gently used items at a thrift or vintage store or giving items like jams, cookies, or other foods that can be consumed (ie they don't need a permanent place in someone's home).

Finally, consider how you will wrap any gift you give. Holiday wrapping paper is cheerful, but you might buy wrapping paper that you can use on other occasions. You can also wrap presents with paper shopping bags, newspaper, butcher paper, or even fabric or put them in a reusable bag.

Simple decorations made from string or yarn you might already have in a drawer or closet and leaves, pinecones, flowers, or dried citrus fruits are beautiful and put less single-use or plastic décor into the waste stream. Natural decorations can be composted!

THE END.