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Christmas Conundrums

Here are a few issues that come up over the holiday season, and some details to help you make some eco-friendly choices .

Artificial vs. Real Trees

Artificial trees are becoming more popular than natural trees, but environmentally, they might not be the best choice. One study determined you would have to use an artificial tree at least 20 years to leave an environmental footprint as small as the real trees.

Artificial trees are certainly convenient. Assuming you use your tree for 10 years, the cost to you is \$10 - \$30/year. Most artificial trees are made in China of metal and polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plastic that is petroleum derived and emits carcinogens during production, and the trees must be transported here. PVC trees are not recyclable, and will stay in landfills for years.



A cut tree is a Christmas tradition: they look and smell good! The cost could be nil to \$60 or more, and generally come from closer to home. A farmed tree absorbs carbon dioxide over its lifetime, produces oxygen and filters airborne pollutants. Farmed trees are replaced by one to three more, so don't deplete the forests. However, if not farmed organically, pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers may be used. Bonus: producing and harvesting the trees provides jobs for Canadians. Natural trees can be "treecycled": chipped into mulch, used for erosion control, and used for fish and wildlife habitat. But even in a landfill, the tree will eventually biodegrade.

Shopping vs Shipping

Online shopping is almost too easy. Find something in an online catalogue, click a few times and next thing you know, a delivery van is pulling into your driveway. But you've got to wonder if all the packaging and the to-your-door transportation is the green way to go. What if you could buy that item in a local store, wouldn't that be better? Buying local is the best option, but what if you need to drive to the big city? The Environmental Defense Fund suggest that you shop online if you drive a gas-guzzling vehicle or live more than five miles from the store. Avoid same day delivery, because that probably means a less-than-full delivery truck on the road. And try to combine your orders instead of doing individual orders. Try to reuse the shipping packaging, and recycle what you can. If you are purchasing a gift you need to send on, consider having it giftwrapped by the online store and shipped directly to the recipient. Shop in the store if you can take public transportation, or need to browse or try on items. And be sure to combine errands, car pool, or try to shop on your way to or from a destination.



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LED Lights vs. Incandescents

You may be thinking of switching to LED (light emitting diode) Christmas lights for indoor or outdoor use, but are concerned about the waste of getting rid of your old lights. Don't be. The energy savings are so substantial it makes good sense. Here's how BC Hydro has calculated the costs: *Decorating your home with LED lights could reduce holiday lighting energy use by up to 90%. A typical 50-bulb incandescent strand of lights uses 250 watts and an equivalent 70-bulb LED strand uses only three watts. For a house that operates holiday lights for six hours a day through the month of December, with an energy price of 8.27 cents per kilowatt hour, six strands of incandescent holiday lights would cost over \$23 to power versus a mere 28 cents for LEDs. By replacing the incandescent strands with LEDs, it would save you \$22.79 in energy costs for the month.*



Besides using less energy, LEDs are less prone to breakage, and do not produce heat (so are cool to the touch and less of a fire hazard). LEDs last about 50,000 hours on average, versus 3,000 hours for incandescent lights, so they are a good investment.

What to do with your old lights? Metal recyclers will take them for the copper in the wire, paying more for cleaned wire than if the light bulbs are left in. When we get older-style, incandescent strings at the REAL Deal Reuse Store, we take them off the market, and get a little money for the scrap wire.

If LED lights are not in the plans for you, you can still reduce your Christmas lighting electricity use by reducing the number and size of lights you use, and limiting the hours you use your lights. Make it easier by using a timer. You can also use an extension cord over stretches that do not require lights.

Dishwasher vs. Hand Washing Dishes

Using a dishwasher to clean up after Christmas dinner will have less environmental impact than hand washing, unless you can hand wash with very minimal rinsing. A study at the University of Bonn found that a dishwasher uses only half the energy, one-sixth of the water, and less soap versus hand washing. However, your dishwasher model, rinsing time, and water heating method all come into play. If you can rinse very sparingly, you could conceivably use less than the six gallons that a conventional dishwasher uses or four gallons of water used by the more energy efficient models. You may use cooler water than a dishwasher does, and save some energy there. Heating two gallons of water with gas or on-demand water heaters emits 0.17 or 0.14 pounds of carbon dioxide (CO₂), but an electric tank heater emits 0.51 pound of CO₂ to heat the same water.

The David Suzuki foundation offers these tips to greener dishwashing:

- Run your machine full, on the "light" cycle and turn off the "heated drying" option.
- Choose an eco-friendly dishwasher and an eco-friendly dishwashing soap.
- Hand wash big pots and serving dishes (they take up too much space), and plastic containers (they release harmful chemicals when washed).
- Scrape food into the compost instead of wasting water rinsing.

So maybe you can set the dishwasher going and enjoy some social time washing the pots and plastics with some of your guests!

