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Some fresh new ideas for 'greening the holidays'

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

"Greening the holidays" began as a grass-roots movement, but it practically has turned into an industry.

Hundreds of media stories, products and Web sites promise to help you reduce the environmental impact of the holidays. Many of the same old tips just keep getting recycled, resulting in green-holidays overload.

But there's a reason this topic gets so much attention. Many of us yearn for healthier, more meaningful, less expensive and less wasteful holidays. Thankfully, local resources for green holidays keep rising to the occasion with fresh new ideas.

Because meals and parties play such an integral role in the holidays, today we'll focus on green-holiday entertaining.

Q: Since Thanksgiving kicks off the holiday season, why don't we start there?

A: Greening the traditional Thanksgiving feast makes it even more delicious. Locally produced foods, including more than 20 fresh vegetables now in season, have lower transportation impacts and often are grown using sustainable practices.

Some farmers-market veggies such as carrots taste so much better than regular supermarket vegetables that your dinner guests may be amazed.

The Eat Local for Thanksgiving program, sponsored by King County and others, provides a cornucopia of resources (www.EatLocalforThanksgiving.org) that make it easy to support area farmers.

After Thanksgiving, continue to set the table with local foods for holiday dinners and parties. Twelve farmers markets in Western Washington are open through December, including five in Seattle. For a full list, visit www.PugetSoundFresh.org.

Q: After the party's over, then what?

A: Sending leftovers home with your guests will help ensure they get eaten. But there's always food waste, and most single-family households in this area can put their food scraps and food-soiled paper in their yard-waste collection bin.

Because of program changes, this is the first holiday season Seattle residents can include meat and dairy products in the yard-waste bin with the rest of the food scraps (most area residents already could do that).

Never put cooking oil or grease down the drain. It belongs in the garbage in a sealed container. If you have lots of cooking grease from deep frying a turkey, you can take it to General Biodiesel in West Seattle for free recycling. Call them at 206-932-1600 for more information.

Q: I always like to bring a host or hostess gift to a party. Any ideas?

A: Once again, the farmers market can come to the rescue with locally produced food items or arrangements of holiday greens. Also consider Northwest-made organic beer, wine or cider.

Q: At my own parties, I always give guests little gifts as they leave. What's a green alternative?

A: Some hosts now reduce waste by donating to a charity instead of handing out those "parting gifts," and guests usually think that's great.

Q: When we have lots of people over for the holidays, my utility bills go up about 20 percent. What can I do about that?

A: One neat trick is to run your ceiling fan clockwise in the winter, which distributes the heat better so you can keep the furnace turned down a notch (in the summer it should run counter-clockwise).

A much-anticipated, federally funded rebate program for certain energy-efficient appliances is not expected to begin in Washington state until at least February. That won't help you this season but could reduce your energy bills for future holidays, and all year around. Rebates are expected to be \$50-100 per appliance.

Find a sleigh-full of home-energy-saving tips for the holidays at www.ConsumerEnergyCenter.org/tips/holiday.

Q: What are the best resources for all sorts of green holidays ideas, beyond just holiday entertaining?

A: King County's new Green Holidays program (www.KCgreenholidays.com) and the Issaquah-based Web site www.CelebrateGreen.net provide many creative ideas.

The green-holidays concept may be well-established these days, but it's no less relevant. All it needs now is its own holiday song. Where's Bing Crosby when you need him?

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