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Ways to cut back on holiday excess

By Tom Watson

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At least once during the holiday season, most of us think, "You know, the Grinch had a point."

It can all seem like too much. Too many presents to wrap and give. Sometimes even too many gifts to receive. Too many social engagements. Too much pressure to do all those things we're supposed to do during the holidays.

And to top it off, some folks add to their plate an extra helping of guilt about all the consumption and waste.

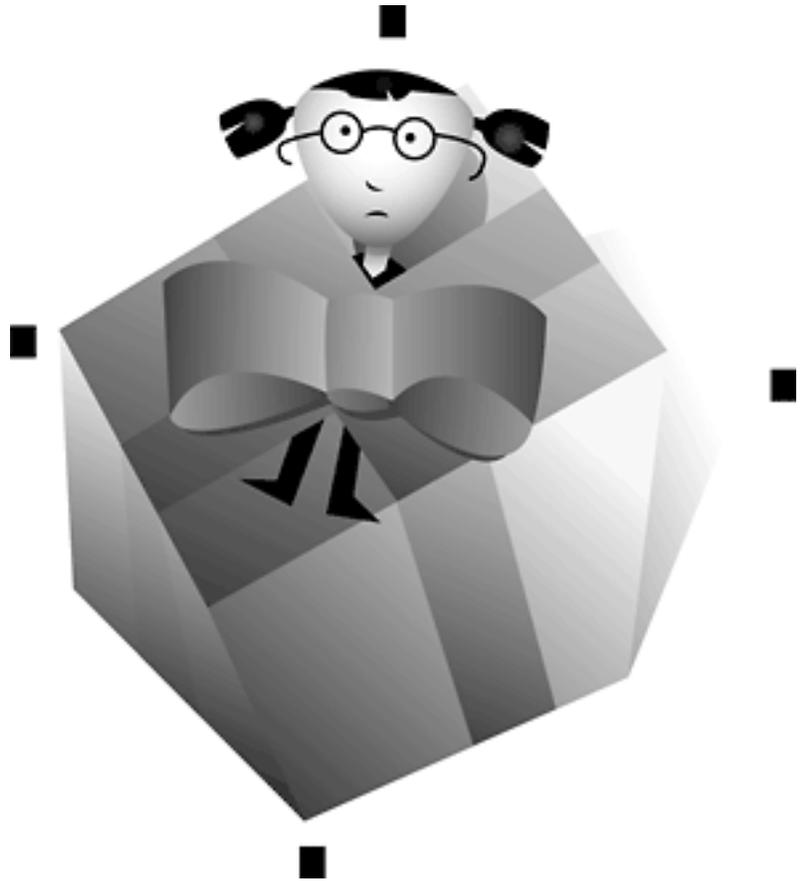
Fortunately, greener and mellower holidays go hand in hand.

A present for yourself

Start with gifts. The average American adult will spend \$620 on holiday gifts this year, according to a National Retail Federation survey. For many families, holiday spending exacerbates financial worries.

Here in the Seattle area, it's easy to find people who have successfully reduced the number of gifts they give, lessening their environmental impact, saving money and reducing stress. Strategies for cutting back on gift-giving — without appearing cheap or rude — include:

- Pick a friend who you know will be receptive, and agree not to exchange gifts. Go out for dinner or



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drinks instead, or donate money to a favorite organization.

- If you have a tradition of making (or baking) certain gifts or treats, but start dreading it right about now because of all the time it will take, simply give yourself the year off. Most of your annual recipients will understand. Instead you could make a donation in their name.
- In a large extended family, draw names so that each person gives one person a gift, instead of everyone buying for everyone.
- For presents you do buy, consider an "experience gift" through the Waste Free Holidays program (www.wastefreeholidays.com) in King, Kitsap, Pierce and Thurston counties. Participating businesses offer discounts of 15 percent or more on nonmaterial gifts, including relaxing experiences such as spa visits and massages.
- If your spouse or partner agrees, give each other practical gifts you would have bought anyway, such as tools, pots and pans or a laptop computer. This helps reduce the money drain.
- Gift cards or certificates, along with cash, make the most efficient gifts for both the buyer and recipient. Gift cards also reduce waste another way: An estimated 10 percent never get redeemed.

Lighten up

Saving time and money in decorating can also improve your holiday mood. The typical consumer spends \$50 on holiday decorating, such as Christmas trees, lights and candles.

Energy-saving LED (light-emitting diode) holiday lights have become the eco-friendly star of holiday decorating. This fall, Consumer Reports compared LEDs and traditional incandescent holiday lights. The results: LEDs use just a fraction of the energy, do not get nearly as hot (reducing fire risk) and should last longer.

Though more expensive to buy, LEDs will often pay for themselves through reduced energy bills in just two years. Many Seattle-area hardware stores, home improvement centers and drug stores now carry LED holiday lights.

Instead of buying a cut Christmas tree, consider a donation to tree-planting programs supported by the nonprofit organization American Forests (www.americanforests.org/planttrees). Choose from their 17 tree-planting programs around the world, including a project to help restore Southern California forests devastated by the recent wildfires.

If you still want to display your holiday ornaments, hang your favorites on houseplants.

Greening the social whirl

In the Seattle region, we have hundreds of holiday activities to choose from, not to mention the parties in our own social and work circles. As you choose which events to attend, include the environment and your own mental health in your criteria. Driving 30 miles to a party mainly to avoid hurting the feelings of friends might be worth it. On the other hand, if you beg off, perhaps you could make it up to them another way.

Save money by attending free events nearby. For example, the Christmas ships, featuring a different local choir each night, visit more than 50 Puget Sound-area waterfront communities through to Dec. 23 (www.seattle.gov/parks/events/ChristmasShip.htm).

For your own annual parties and dinners, set a goal to downsize at least one aspect of the bash. You could forgo party favors this time. Or use no new store-bought decorations (trim holly and other greens from your yard or neighbors' yards instead). Or buy two pies instead of three. Chances are no one will even notice the changes.

When you green up and chill out this holiday season, you'll save money and have more fun. And you can give your inner Grinch the year off.

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