

Columnists

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EcoConsumer

Time to get into your holiday recycling zone

With Christmas rapidly approaching, here's hoping you're already in the holiday celebration zone, embracing the annual routine of parties, events, shopping and decorating. Even if you're not quite in that zone yet, you can enhance your holidays by also seeking another destination: The holiday recycling zone.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

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Q: What's so special about recycling during the holiday season?

A: Being in the holiday recycling zone means that you've seamlessly incorporated recycling and waste reduction into your planning and activities. Because so many diverse types of waste are generated during the holidays, it helps to educate yourself in advance about the easiest, most convenient ways to handle everything.

The most useful overall resource will likely be King County's "What Do I Do With?" (WDIDW) website (KingCounty.gov/WhatDoIDoWith), which lists locations for recycling, reuse and proper disposal for more than 100 categories of materials. This month WDIDW highlights recycling of holiday-related items, from Christmas trees to holiday lights. King County residents can also call 206-296-4466 for recycling help.

Q: Getting down to specifics, how do we deal with the humongous pile of packaging after all the presents have been opened?

A: That's where the consumption-centric nature of our modern holiday celebrations rears its head. All the cardboard and paper packaging can go right into your home recycling bin.

However, the hard, clear plastic packaging that encases many small products needs to go in the garbage. It's not accepted by local recycling-collection programs, even if it has the "recycling arrows" symbol on it, because of a lack of markets and uses for that material.

The polystyrene (usually called Styrofoam) chunks used to protect electronics and other fragile products are now collected at a few locations locally, thanks to the pioneering efforts of V&G Styro Recycle, a small Renton-based business. Clean polystyrene packing peanuts are accepted by several dozen area businesses that reuse them for shipping. Don't put polystyrene in your home recycling bin, although it's OK to put it in the home garbage.

Q: Wrapping paper goes in the home recycling bin, doesn't it?

A: Yes, and a little tape on it is fine, but no metallic or plastic wrapping. Save the nicest wrapping paper, gift bags and ribbons for next year.

Q: What about old electronics?

A: The nonprofit InterConnection (InterConnection.org, 206-633-1517) in Seattle's Fremont neighborhood refurbishes computers for reuse and accepts many electronics free of charge.

E-Cycle Washington, the state's mandated product-stewardship program, requires manufacturers to pay the costs of recycling computers and TVs, so you don't have to. The program includes more than 130 recycling locations in the Puget Sound area. This year E-Cycle Washington also began accepting electronic book (e-book) readers at no charge.

Q: A surplus of clothes is a common post-holiday hang-up. What's the best way to clean out my closet?

A: If you haven't worn a particular piece of clothing for more than a year, donate it to a charity, but make sure it's in good enough shape to be resold at a thrift store. Toss stained or torn clothes in the garbage or use them for rags. Charities also accept most of your other resalable household items, from furniture to sports equipment.

Q: How about all the leftover food from Christmas and Hanukkah parties and meals and other holiday celebrations?

A: Have a specific plan in mind for how any remaining food and snacks will get used up. This might involve giving leftovers to Cousin Mikey to take home (he'll eat anything), freezing certain items, or combining them into something new such as soup.

For unusable food, most area residents can put all food scraps and food-soiled paper into their yard waste cart for composting pickup. Using compostable bags for food scraps makes cleanup a lot easier during this peak food season. For packaged food gifts you receive that don't ring your holiday bell, donate them to a food bank if they have not been opened.

We all have our holiday must-dos, whether it's drinking eggnog or watching the Christmas ships. This year, make recycling your new holiday tradition.

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