

HOMEMADE HOLIDAYS

I'm Dreaming of a GREEN Christmas...

by Brita Belli



A new movement is afoot to reclaim and refocus the holidays. Part of it stems from a desire to cut back on the wastefulness that comes from accumulating mountains of store-bought gifts and wrappings. Another is the growing desire to generate more meaningful memories during the holidays. One answer is to embrace a do-it-yourself, or DIY, mentality that makes everything—from decorating to tree trimming, cooking and gift giving—personal.

There is no better time to join in activities as a family than Christmas-time. Subtract the frenzied consumerism and there is little for a child not

to love: being with loved ones in the kitchen, measuring flour, rolling dough and cutting cookies; happily sitting around a table, pasting, stamping and glittering; decorating a tree that magically transforms with each addition; and the scents of cookies, candles and cinnamon-dotted wreaths.

Evergreen Centerpieced

Elevating the holiday atmosphere starts with the tree—the centerpiece of holiday celebrations, which too often resembles a department store version these days. Erin Devine, of Portland, Oregon, remembers how her parents' tradition of buying a living Christmas tree from a

local nursery made a vivid impression on her as a child.

"My parents would get the tree with the roots still very much alive in the burlap bag of dirt," recalls Devine, who was raised in Connecticut. "We'd put the tree in a big galvanized tub and just wrap it with a white sheet; then, when Christmas was over, we'd plant the tree somewhere in the four-acre yard."

That appreciation for the vibrant details of the holidays lives on. Now, this mother of three takes a homemade, family-oriented approach to her young family's annual celebration. Last year, they all wrapped recycled glass jars with colored tissue paper as tea lights and pencil holders for adults and made homemade play dough for the kids' friends. They also baked together and made decorations for the house and tree.

"It's one thing to teach kids about being responsible adults and good stewards of this planet, but when we spend time together learning how to do it, it's so much more meaningful," Devine remarks. "When the kids enjoy learning about something and it involves love, it will become important to them."

Sparking Inspiration

Those who are not naturally crafty will find lots of resources for creating beautiful and personal Christmas keepsakes online, as well as on bookstore and library shelves. Many publications offer ideas for decorating the branches of your living—or not-so-living—tree, using household objects that would otherwise be discarded.

Yoga teacher and holistic lifestyle expert Anna Getty went so far as to write *I'm Dreaming of a Green Christmas*, a book that's all about using less, spending less and enjoying family time more. She details a whole new perspective: how to turn recycled chandelier gems into Christmas tree icicles; eggshells and teabags into vintage-style ornaments; and old sweaters into festive wreaths.

Waste Not, Want Not

Such simple pleasures can make a major environmental impact. During the holidays, household waste generally increases by 25 percent—an extra

1 million tons of garbage across the country—according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Holiday craft projects can transform much of this “waste” by making the most of its decorative potential. Shellie Wilson, the founder of *Craftbits.com*, a site that provides thousands of free, do-it-yourself craft ideas, says she and her mother Rita are craft hoarders. “We never throw anything out that we think can be turned into something wonderful,” comments Wilson. Her favorites include a T-shirt pillow that maintains the shirt’s shape and a no-

sew baby overalls purse, using glue in place of thread.

Instructables.com is the kind of user-submitted, DIY, bake it, fix it and tweak it website that invites hours of surfing. Developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, it has become a massive platform for idea sharing, including a page called “Have a DIY Christmas!” that organizes ideas by category. Options range from origami ball decorations and a homemade book clock to gift boxes and tags made from cereal boxes and junk mail. “With the state of the economy lately, people are

looking for more ways to stretch their budgets and repurpose used objects,” remarks Sarah James, editor of *Instructables’* Living and Food website sections.

Along with the benefits of minimizing waste, spending less money and reclaiming quality time with loved ones, making our own gifts and decorations is also fun. The process of discovering, attempting and creating can help unlock our inner artist at any age.

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ECO-TOY JOYS

Spotting Earth-Friendly Gift Ideas for Kids

by Brita Belli



If we resist the urge to charge over to the nearest big-box store to load up on the latest plastic marketing ploys, we’ll likely find more satisfaction in picking toys that will create less of an environmental impact—and more of a personal one. It’s easy to look for the following five eco-friendly attributes.

SOLAR POWERED. Nearly any toy with batteries and a motor can operate with simple sun power instead. Solar versions of traditional toys range from racing cars and quivering grasshoppers to bullet trains that kids build from snap-together parts (Google by type of toy). Solar-powered toys teach kids the benefits of renewable energy, which unlike those with batteries, require no additional cost and produce no battery waste.

BUILT TO LAST. Many toys today are flimsy, cheaply made and even downright toxic. The organization behind *HealthyStuff.org* tests thousands of products each year to help families steer clear of the worst toxins in many common toys—including lead, cadmium, arsenic and mercury.

High-quality toys don’t have to come from a toy store. Check out yard and tag sales, as well as local craft fairs, for well-constructed toys, from

rocking horses and toy chests to bikes, dollhouses and kid collectibles. Or look for new toys made from sustainable materials, like the handmade hardwood sleds, toboggans and wagons made by Mountain Boy Sledworks.

DO-IT-YOURSELF. Craft kits allow a child to make a toy that incorporates his or her own creative vision, all the better when the parts are made of sustainable materials. *Arterro* offers a collection of eco-friendly craft kits, from jewelry and dolls to garden art and bubble wands. Materials include post-consumer waste paper from India; hand-dyed fabrics, wool felt and glass and wooden beads. The San Francisco Museum of Craft & Design sells a bird cafe that encourages kids to explore nature in their backyards once the craft is complete. Any of these is easily found online, searching by name.

Of course, making our own craft kits can be as easy as cutting spare fabric, adding buttons, beads and other found mementos. Assemble all the pieces in a fun container and let kids’ imaginations fly.

ALTERNATIVES TO PLASTIC. Plastic toys are everywhere, and when it comes to softer plastic toys like rubber

duckies, teethers and bath books, they may actually pose a health hazard to growing kids. Such toys often contain phthalates, chemicals that studies like those from Mount Sinai School of Medicine and the Environmental Working Group have linked to behavioral problems, aggression and autism. Look for wooden versions of classic toys instead—from stacking blocks and puzzles to push toys. If they are painted, verify that it was with nontoxic, water-based paint.

Etsy.com represents several designers who specialize in heirloom-quality wooden toys, like Woodmouse animal figures, Just Hatched fruits and veggies and Stump Pond Woodworks creations that spin, dance and tumble through the playroom.

RECYCLED CONTENT. One of the best ways to ensure we’re choosing a “green” gift is to find out if it’s made from recycled content. For the teen set, recycled options help them make a statement, whether it’s a belt accessorized with bottle caps, a purse made of license plates or a bag made from former billboards. TerraCycle even makes mini-boom boxes and speakers out of former M&M’s, Skittles and Starburst candy wrappers (*DwellSmart.com*). Light, portable and super-colorful, they supply a natural complement to any iPod or MP3-player gift this holiday season.

For more ideas, visit Education.com and search [Green Toys](#).