

## I'm Dreaming of a Greener Christmas....

*Some thoughts on how to make more responsible choices this festive season without losing the magic.*

I really love Christmas: goodwill and gifts, indulgent food and drinks, time with family and friends, and the halls are all decked with holly and twinkly lights. But there comes a point in every festive season when the groaning fridge (and my own girth) and overwhelming consumption and accompanying packaging waste start to take the shine off my Christmas bauble. Christmas can really take its toll on the environment as well as our waistline and wallets. Over the festive period the UK produces 30% more rubbish than at other times of the year, including more than 750 million extra wine bottles to be disposed of than in a normal week, and 83 square kilometres of wrapping paper: enough to smother the island of Guernsey. This Christmas, I want to explore ways to enjoy a more responsible Christmas, concentrating on what's important and making better choices for a greener Christmas without losing any of the magic. So here is the result of my investigations which I hope might inspire you to embrace a greener Christmas too.



*Photo courtesy of the author, with homemade decorations knitted by Nana*

### The Christmas Tree

One of my favourite aspects of Christmas is the tree: I love a real tree and the traditions I have made with my family: going to choose one, the smell, the fun of decorating to the sound of some classic tunes, and enjoying the twinkling lights each evening as dusk falls. Yes, of course, we could probably survive Christmas without one, but it's a real focal point and something my young daughter really treasures. I had assumed that opting for a reusable artificial tree would be a greener option, but in fact it turns out real trees are the more sustainable choice. Plastic trees are made of petroleum products (PVC), and use up resources in both

the manufacture and shipping. While artificial trees theoretically last forever, research shows that they are typically discarded when repeated use makes them less attractive. Discarded artificial trees are then sent to landfills, where their plastic content makes them last forever.

Live trees, on the other hand, are a renewable resource grown on tree farms, that are replanted regularly. They contribute to air quality while growing, and almost ninety percent are recycled into mulch. Live trees are usually locally grown and sold, saving both transportation costs and added air pollution. Live trees also smell like Christmas! If you opt for a felled tree choose a local grower with FSC<sup>®</sup> or Soil Association accreditation. The FSC<sup>®</sup> certificate ensures that the trees have been grown sustainably and ethically. Chip and mulch it afterwards: this chipped material makes an excellent mulch for shrub beds and garden pathways. Live potted trees can be used for years: if you buy a small tree in a large pot, you may be able to reuse the tree for 2- 3 years without having to plant or re-pot the tree. The Woodland Trust recommends that if you



*Photo credit: Peterley Manor Farm*  
[www.peterleymanorfarm.co.uk](http://www.peterleymanorfarm.co.uk)

are buying a live one, make sure it's a native fir like a Caledonian Pine. Keep it in a large tub to bring in and out of the house each year until it gets too heavy, then either plant it in your garden or offer it to your nearest nature reserve. Children will love to watch it grow bigger each year. Some garden centres and tree nurseries now offer a Christmas tree rental scheme. This allows you to rent your Christmas tree in a pot and return it to the growers afterwards, and the tree is then reused in future years.

## Decorations

Twinkly lights are a big part of the festive season. My daughter and I look forward to the evenings drawing in to spot new and ever-more entrancing house decorations around the local neighbourhood. If you are due a new set of lights, choose LEDs which use up to 95% less energy than larger, traditional festive bulbs and last up to 100,000 hours when used indoors. Energy efficient LEDs use .04 watts per bulb, 10 times less than mini bulbs and 100 times less than traditional bulbs – saving electricity AND saving you money. As an added bonus, if one of the LED lights burns out the rest of the strand will stay lit. And don't forget to switch them off: it's simply a waste of energy to leave the festive lights on at night after everyone's gone to sleep. If you are going away this Christmas, install an automatic timer light switch rather than leave them on all the time. As for decorating the tree, I will try and use what we've got already rather than adding more tinsel and baubles that are normally full of plastic. If you have time, a pretty (and tastier) alternative might be to hang strings of popcorn or home-baked Christmas cookies from the tree. Meanwhile, I will be using foraged fir cones and sprigs of real holly to bring on the festive cheer around the house.

## Wrapping paper

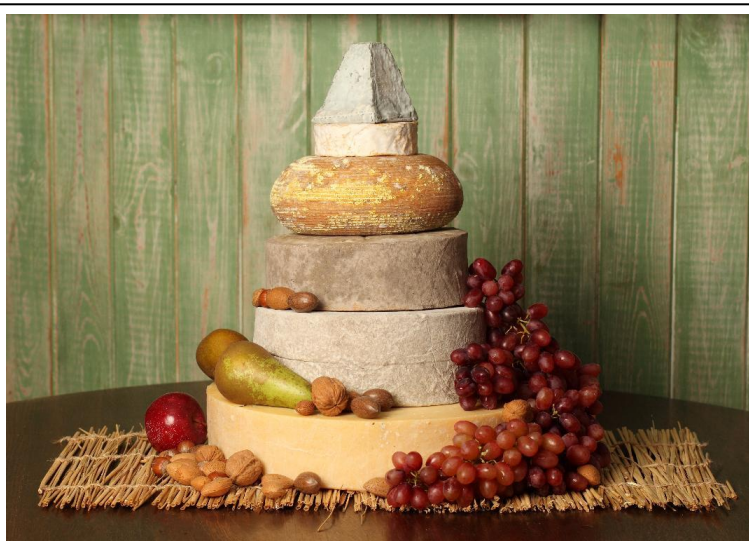
Lots of wrapping paper contains plastic and therefore cannot be recycled, so choose wrapping paper made using fibres such as hemp, or paper using recycled content. Or go understated using brown parcel paper blinged up with some home-made decoration such as stencils or potato prints. Reuse where possible, and avoid buying glossy foil or metallic wrapping paper, which can't be recycled.

## Christmas Lunch

I have been delighted to see a general call for an end to Christmas crackers with their associated plastic tat, but you can get ones made from recycled materials or find kits to make your own. In terms of food, I will be trying to shop locally to both save food miles, cut down on plastic packaging and support local producers. Other suggestions might include serving British cheeses; buying Brussels sprouts from a farm shop still on the stalk (they will keep for up to two weeks in a shed or on the patio, saving vital fridge space and cutting down on packaging); and choosing a turkey which is free-range or from an organic supplier, which uses less energy-intensive ways of rearing meat.



Photo credit: Peterley Manor Farm ([www.peterleymanorfarm.co.uk](http://www.peterleymanorfarm.co.uk))



British Cheeses, photo credit: 2 Pound Street ([www.2poundstreet.com](http://www.2poundstreet.com))

I will be trying hard this year to plan well and only buy as much as we need. One report I read stated that it is estimated that a staggering 74 million mince pies are thrown away each Christmas, along with 4.2 million plates of turkey and trimmings. This isn't just a shocking waste of the time, money and effort put into growing, manufacturing, transporting and cooking food that ultimately ends up in the bin but also has a detrimental impact on the environment given that food and drink waste accounts for up to 20% of the UK's CO2 emissions. More generally I will be attempting to cut down on the number of journeys I make in the car by being

more organised, and planning plenty of meat-free meals amongst the on-going feasting.

## **Create/continue new family traditions that don't rely on consumption**

I am going to plan some family activities which don't rely on eating, shopping etc, and provide a great opportunity give something back to the earth, instilling the values of sustainable living to our children, friends, and community. Examples might be a Boxing Day Family walk, bike ride, an annual bird count, getting out a jigsaw or board games, or decorating a tree outside - a fun activity which will provide valuable food source for birds, using seed balls, pine cones filled with peanut butter, and filling feeders.

Other ways to think about others less fortunate than ourselves might involve collecting a box of as-good-as new toys to donate to a local refuge such as Saunderton Lodge. Or use the Advent period to create a box to donate to a local Food Bank, putting in one non-perishable food item a day in the countdown to Christmas.

## **Christmas presents**

My intention is to buy less (or rather, suggest Father Christmas lightens his load a little!) and especially to cut down on gifts involving lots of plastic, batteries or excessive packaging. For older children and adults, buying experiences is a nice way to give something memorable which doesn't involve more consumables, for example, restaurant vouchers or cinema or gig tickets. Any unwanted presents can be disposed of ethically by "regifting" (via [www.regifting.com](http://www.regifting.com)) or join your local freecycling group ([www.freecycle.org](http://www.freecycle.org))

I'm sure you will all agree that we have reached a critical point in our collective history and need to urgently consider more responsible choices around how we consume and dispose of the world's limited resources. I know I am far from perfect, and my Christmas wish is that I can keep trying to do better in future. In the meantime, may I wish you all a merry, memorable and perhaps more measured Christmas to you and all your families.

Naomi Rogers, SEAG

## **Greener Gift Guide: ten sustainable gift ideas for a greener giving this Christmas**

1. Beeswax food wraps
2. A pollinator-friendly plant from your garden (split it now whilst dormant), or packet of pollinator-friendly plant seeds
3. Reusable coffee cup or water bottle
4. "Gift of your time" voucher: offer to take someone out, babysit, cook a meal, mow a lawn etc.
5. Garden or gallery annual memberships
6. Edible homemade food gifts, such as chocolate truffles, homemade granola, Christmas cake
7. Homemade fat balls for birds
8. Christmas bee saver kits from [www.friendsoftheearth.uk](http://www.friendsoftheearth.uk)
9. Sponsor a puppy for £3 a month at the Hearing Dogs Trust [www.hearingdogs.org.uk](http://www.hearingdogs.org.uk)
10. Vegetarian/vegan cookbooks, from leading foodies such as  
Jamie Oliver (Veg),  
Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall (River Cottage: Much More Veg),  
Yotam Ottolenghi (Plenty) or  
Nigel Slater (Greenfeast)