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## A Less Harmful Holiday Season

The end of the year brings multiple joyous occasions as people get to rekindle with their families and enjoy their time doing fun winter activities. This is also a time of the year when consumption is at its highest due to gift-giving traditions. In fact, statistics show that Canadians spend the most money around the holiday season compared to any other time of the year (PwC, 2021). This is excellent news for businesses as profits are at their highest but presents a rather grim reality for our planet, which will be discussed in detail later on. Besides the environment, the holiday season also presents qualms for our health as we surround ourselves with potentially dangerous items.

The following article will discuss how holiday consumerism affects the planet and alternatives for a safe and conscious holiday season.

### **It's the Most Wasteful Time of The Year**

When you look at the average holiday shopper's spending habits, it becomes clear as to why the holidays threaten our planet. Each year, Canadians increase their average household waste by 25% during the holiday season (Zero Waste Canada). This waste comes from food, travel habits, gift-shopping behaviours, and other wasteful holiday materials such as unsustainable decorations. Statisticians have observed that even consumers who are attempting to be more eco-conscious end up giving into their traditional holiday behaviours. Most of this is out of fear of breaking traditions and thereby reducing the magic of the season.

### **Some facts about holiday consumption:**

- Canadians increase their spending from between 29-40% during the holidays (PwC, 2021). A large chunk of this comes from gift-shopping and travel expenses.
- Plastic pollution increases due to the consumption of artificial Christmas trees, gifts that are wrapped in plastic packaging, ornaments, decorations, and other such holiday-related items (Cotton, 2018).
- Millennials are one of the biggest spenders compared to Gen Z, Gen X, and Baby Boomers (PwC, 2021).
- Buying gift-wrapping paper and materials end up creating around 545,000



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- tonnes of waste annually in Canada (Zero Waste Canada). These papers are often non-recyclable because of the dyes that cover them.
- Studies show that the average individual acquires 80% more food around the holidays, and although people do eat more around this time, a large portion of that food is wasted (Zero Waste Canada).

## 'Tis The Season to Be Mindful

We cannot protect ourselves and the planet adequately if we keep giving into our old behaviours that hold a nostalgic grip on us. Fortunately, it is possible to maintain your precious family traditions by making small tweaks.

**The Art of Gift-Wrapping.** Nothing makes a person happier than seeing a loved one smile after they unwrap their gift. Fortunately, you do not have to bid farewell to this feeling because better alternatives exist. To start off, avoid using gift wrapping paper and opt for wrapping supplies that you might already have. Good alternatives include newspaper, flyers, old magazines, and cloth/fabric. You can also choose to bag your gifts in a nice reusable bag. As an additional tip, avoid using tape and opt for ribbons or strings instead. Lastly, if you must wrap your gifts, look for biodegradable wrapping paper and tape.

**The Simpler Gifts.** This is where it might get a little complicated, but do not fret because you can still impress your loved ones with safer gifts. To begin, make yourself a list of the things they like and take some time to see if there are alternatives for each. Much of the popular holiday gift items have safe and eco-friendly alternatives.

- Makeup and beauty care products have safer alternatives. Find [here](#).
- Avoid plastic toys. Look for PVC-free options and wooden toys. Find more information [here](#).
- Avoid buying clothes from large retailers, and instead, look for locally-made clothes. Shop for materials that are of high-quality and have durability.
- Some jewelry pieces can contain a bad mix of toxins that can affect certain individuals negatively over time. This often includes lead, cadmium, nickel, and plastics (Made Safe). To avoid unwanted reactions, make sure to buy jewelry that contains pure and safe materials like 100% gold, 100% sterling silver, vermeil, or non-metal materials.





**Introduction to E-Waste.** Re-think electronics as a gift. E-waste is becoming a huge problem for the planet with around 50 million metric tonnes being generated annually in Canada alone (Hunt et al., n.d.). Most of the time, the person receiving this gift probably already possesses enough electronics to fulfill all their virtual needs. Ask yourself whether you are buying the gift because it is part of a new trend or if it is a productive solution for the receiving individual. If your answer is the former, chances are that you will be contributing to e-waste.

**Out of Options.** If you are still hesitating on what to get, try to gift an experience. Time is more valuable than material objects, so something as simple as tickets to a baseball game or a movie theatre can truly make someone's day. Check out this [EHAQ Newsletter](#) to see more ideas.

**Decorations & Trees.** Without these, the holiday season can feel dull and gloomy. Luckily, there are many green alternatives that you can opt for to reduce your carbon footprint.

- Avoid buying artificial Christmas trees that are often made of plastic materials. See solutions [here](#).
- Make your own ornaments from wood or glass and use eco-friendly paint and natural dyes to embellish them. If you want a fun activity, you can even build 3D ornaments with construction paper. You can also use natural decorations like acorns and even popcorn if you are comfortable making a garland out of it.

**Food Paradise.** Holiday food items are just as memorable and valuable as the gifts and moments that are shared during this time of the year. If you are hosting a party, know your guest list and prepare portions accordingly. To begin, if you know the number of guests coming over, make sure you have a matching number of re-usable plates and utensils. Too large of a party? Visit your local store or thrift store. Here are some tips to set up a nice dinner table:

- **Theme Fanatics.** Ditch the idea of a uniform theme and go for a more eclectic "mixed" theme so that you do not have to worry about things matching. This way, perhaps, you will not even need to visit a store to assemble your table; simply use what you already have. On the flip side, if you are fond of uniform themes, opt for colors that you can easily find options for at the store. Colors like white or black can often be re-used year after year even if your overarching theme changes.

Now that you have your tools ready, let's discuss the food itself. Ideally, you know what your guests like to eat, and you know just how much they are likely to eat. In this manner, you can roughly calculate how many portions you need to buy for each. If you do not want to risk buying too little, ask your guests in advance if possible. Alternatively, if you



do end up buying a surplus of food and anticipate hefty leftovers, prepare to box them for each guest (or at least for those who want leftovers) to offer it to them before they leave.

- You can also “re-use” the leftovers for yourself either as a meal prep for the following week and/or by modifying them slightly. For instance, leftover turkey can be used to make a turkey sandwich for lunch next day.

If you want to find more alternatives for this holiday season, please check out these EHAQ newsletters:

- [Green Christmas](#) (Ball, 2021)
- [Less Waste for a Meaningful Gifting Season](#) (Pierrefeu, 2020)
- [Going Green: The Choice of a Christmas Tree](#) (Lanouette-Babin, 2020)

We also invite you to check out our Eco Living Guide here to get you inspired on great alternatives: <http://www.ecolivingguide.ca>.

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