



Association pour la santé environnementale du Québec
Environmental Health Association of Québec

ECO-JOURNAL

December 2024

Sustainable Gift-Giving: Choosing Meaningful Gifts That Reduce Waste

The holiday season is a joyful time for giving, but it's also one of the most wasteful. Canadians, in particular, see a dramatic rise in waste during this season. According to Zero Waste Canada, over half a million tonnes of waste is produced each year from gift-wrapping and shopping bags alone.¹ To put this in perspective, that's the weight of around 100,000 elephants or 4.5 CN Towers¹! Beyond that, food waste spikes during this time, with the average Canadian household losing \$1,766 each year due to avoidable food waste, much of which happens during the holidays.²

This environmental impact highlights the need for us to rethink holiday traditions. Instead of giving gifts that contribute to waste, consider options that are thoughtful, sustainable, and, most importantly, meaningful.

The Environmental Cost of Holiday Waste

From Thanksgiving to New Year's, the amount of trash in Canada rises sharply. Wrapping paper, plastic packaging, leftover food, and broken-down cardboard boxes all contribute to greenhouse gas emissions, with much of it ending up in landfills or incinerators. Studies from Stanford University have shown a 25% increase in waste during the holiday season, with 25 million extra tons of garbage generated.³ In Canada, Zero Waste





Canada reports that household waste, including food, can increase by as much as 25% over the holidays, much of it coming from large family meals, celebrations, and excessive packaging.³

Reducing Waste with Meaningful, Sustainable Gift Choices

To help make the holiday season more environmentally friendly, here are some ideas for sustainable, thoughtful gifts that minimize waste while still conveying the holiday spirit.

1. **Give Experiences, Not Things** Instead of buying physical items, consider gifting experiences. Concert tickets, a cooking class, or a day trip can create lasting memories without creating waste. Experiences also support local businesses and provide unique, personal gifts.
2. **Homemade Gifts with a Personal Touch** Handcrafted gifts, such as baked goods, homemade candles, or personalized crafts, add a personal touch to your holiday giving. These items often use fewer resources than mass-produced gifts and can be made from sustainable or recycled materials.
3. **Support Local and Sustainable Businesses** When purchasing gifts, consider supporting Canadian businesses that prioritize sustainability. This helps reduce carbon emissions associated with shipping and supports local economies.
4. **Gift of Time and Services** Offering your time or services can be one of the most meaningful gifts. Babysitting for a friend, cooking a meal for a busy family member, or offering help with tasks can be invaluable, thoughtful, and completely waste-free.



5. **Donate on Behalf of Loved Ones** A donation to a cause close to someone's heart—whether it's environmental protection, supporting those with multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS), or helping a local shelter—is a wonderful way to show you care. This can also raise awareness about important issues while minimizing waste.
6. **Rethink Gift Wrap and Packaging** Get creative with eco-friendly gift wrap. Using fabric, scarves, or reusable bags to wrap presents can reduce waste, and they add an extra layer of thoughtfulness. If you prefer traditional wrapping, look for recycled paper or newspaper that can be recycled again.

Small Changes, Big Impact

By choosing meaningful, waste-free gifts, Canadians can celebrate the holiday season while minimizing our environmental footprint. Let's make this season one of joy, connection, and sustainability—embracing the opportunity to give gifts that matter to both our loved ones and the planet.

For individuals with MCS, the holiday season can bring unique challenges. Traditional gifts, often wrapped in scented paper, plastics, or heavily perfumed packaging, can contain chemicals that trigger severe reactions for those with MCS. By choosing sustainable and thoughtful gift options—such as homemade items, experiences, or donations in their name—we not only reduce environmental waste but also create a safer, more inclusive holiday experience. Simple, fragrance-free, and low-waste gifts are a mindful way to honour the needs of loved ones with MCS, ensuring that our celebrations prioritize their health and comfort. This shift in our holiday traditions benefits both people and the planet, making the season brighter for everyone.



¹ Zero waste Canada. Zero Waste Canada. (n.d.). <https://www.zerowastecanada.ca/>

² Milbrath, S. (2022, March 29). 8 food waste facts that every Canadian should know. Second Harvest Blog. <https://blog.secondharvest.ca/2021/12/01/food-waste-facts-every-canadian-should-know/>

³ Take action. Sustainable Stanford. (n.d.). <https://sustainable.stanford.edu/take-action>