



The Daily Gleaner

November 22, 2008

Plan Your 'Green' Christmas Now

I like to think of November as the 'calm before the storm' – the storm being the holiday season! This month you can still get some early Christmas shopping in without being too overwhelmed, and it's also a great time to make some early decisions about your family's holiday this year.

Each year my family makes a conscious decision not to "over-do it". But even if you are a good planner, there are so many outside influences that affect habits and buying patterns, that when all is said and done it is a hard task not to "over-do it".

However, given both the planetary crisis and the economic downturn, it's time to put some serious thought towards a more responsible holiday season, both environmentally and economically. What does that mean? In a word, it means 'less'. Economically-speaking 'less' is self-explanatory! And in terms of the environment, 'less' has many benefits. First, less waste due to decisions that result in minimal packaging and wrapping, and maximum potential for reuse. Second, less energy consumed by choosing low wattage LED Christmas lighting; or organizing your Christmas errands strategically to minimize using your car. And remember when entertaining and having Christmas parties, choose to have minimal waste and move away from disposables to 'reusables' (dishes, napkins, etc.), or recyclables at the very least.

So now is the time to sit down and talk with your family about how everyone can do his or her part. Before the letters to Santa are written, ask the kids to consider the toys or gadgets they are asking for. Will they end up in the landfill in two years or twenty? Will they lose interest in the gadget in a few months? Does it take batteries?

This year try teaching your children about the entire life cycle of the product they are longing for. This includes the fact that it might be made from plastic parts; or maybe it's made in a far away country which means the transportation footprint (carbon emissions) of getting it to the store is very high. When it comes to battery-operated toys, perhaps if they knew that what is in a battery (cadmium or nickel-metal) is not good for the environment when they sit for many years in landfills, they might reconsider. But if batteries are a must for some items, choose long-life rechargeable batteries.

Keep in mind that not everything must be bought new for that person on your list. Are your children in college? Check online classified sites for nearly-new furniture, electronics, or home appliances. Looking for a beautiful piece of jewelry for someone special? Check with local artisans or online for ecologically responsible or recycled pieces. Think of it this way: there is an abundance of metals such as gold and diamonds that have already been mined, so why not recycle them and put them into 'reuse'? Another way to keep a low environmental footprint during the Christmas season is to buy local. And fortunately Fredericton has many local artisans who sell incredible gift items such as handbags, jewelry, and clothing.

And no matter where or what you buy, go for low packaging! And try to choose a gift that has recyclable packaging, like cardboard. Keep in mind that shiny wrapping paper and tissue are not recyclable, so commit this year to eliminating them from your wrapping habits.

Never doubt that something homemade and from the heart is always a great gift – bake a loaf of bread or let the kids decorate gingerbread cookies, put them in a basket covered with a holiday dish towel and you have a zero-waste (and yummy!) gift.

The key is planning early for a low-waste, low impact Christmas – it affects everything from decorating, to food, to gifts, wrapping and entertaining. The legacy of Christmas each year should not be to add to our landfill or peak-out our power consumption – it should be the practice of giving, receiving and sharing in the spirit it was first intended. I'm guessing that didn't involve shiny paper!

Jessica Scott is an Environmental Policy Researcher with the City of Fredericton's Green Matters Team. For more information on how to have a 'green' Christmas check out www.greenmattersfredericton.ca.