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Down to Humus

A publication of Congregation of the Humility of Mary

"The word 'humble' comes from 'humus' derived from the Latin meaning earth or ground. Humus is matter essential for fertility of the soil. It is integral to the cycle of life; plants need it for growth…Thus it is appropriate that in our mission statement, we commit ourselves to care for the earth itself." -Bernadine Pieper, CHM. Taken from The Humility Woman Booklet, page 3.

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From Decorations to Gifts: Earth-Friendly Ideas

The Christmas season often brings joy, warmth, and togetherness—but it also brings an enormous amount of waste. Between gift wrap, packaging, disposable décor, and energy use, Americans generate an estimated 25% more trash during the holidays than at any other time of year. Yet Christmas, at its heart, is about simplicity, generosity and caring for creation. With a few intentional choices, we can celebrate in ways that honor the spirit of the season while treading more gently on Earth.

Small actions, multiplied across households and workplaces, create meaningful change. Here are thoughtful, beautiful, and surprisingly simple ideas for a greener Christmas—covering decorations, gifts, wrapping, and traditions that lighten our footprint.

Sustainable Holiday Decorations

Decorating is one of the most beloved parts of the season. Fortunately, the most meaningful décor is often the most eco-friendly.

Choose natural materials
Fresh greenery such as pine boughs, cedar, holly and eucalyptus make beautiful garlands and centerpieces—and they're compostable after the holidays. Dried orange slices, cinnamon sticks, pinecones and cranberries can be strung into fragrant, colorful garlands. These elements not only reduce plastic use but also bring a warm, classic feeling to your home.



Use what you already have
Before buying new, take stock of what's in storage. Most ornaments, lights, bows and wreaths have years of life left in them. Mixing old pieces with a few updated touches creates a timeless look without adding waste.

Purchase décor that lasts
If you need new items, choose durable pieces made from wood, glass, ceramic or metal rather than plastic. Thrift stores are wonderful places to find holiday décor with character—often at a fraction of the price.

Make your own ornaments
Handmade ornaments from salt dough, paper, fabric scraps or natural materials become future keepsakes. In offices or community settings, ornament-making can be a simple morale-boosting activity that builds connection while reducing the urge to buy more.

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Energy-smart lighting
Holiday lights create a beautiful glow, but they can also increase energy use. Switch to LED bulbs, which use up to 75% less energy and last longer than traditional incandescent strings. Set lights on timers to keep them on only during the early evening hours. For outdoor décor, consider solar-powered stakes or lanterns that recharge during the day. Even small adjustments like turning off indoor tree lights before bed can reduce energy consumption while keeping the ambiance intact.

Thoughtful, Low-Waste Gifts

Gift-giving is a highlight of the season, but it can also generate piles of packaging, unwanted items and short-lived products. Choosing greener gifts doesn't mean limiting joy—it simply means shifting focus.

Give experiences instead of objects
Tickets to a show, membership to a museum, a gift card to a local restaurant or a pass to a nature center create memories rather than clutter.

Useful, consumable or sustainable gifts
Local honey, handmade soaps, beeswax candles, fair-trade coffee, loose-leaf tea or artisan foods are appreciated and create little waste. For practical gifts, consider reusable items like stainless steel water bottles, cloth produce bags or beeswax wraps.

Support local and small businesses
Buying locally reduces shipping emissions and supports community makers—from potters and woodworkers to weavers and bakers.

Regifting and secondhand goods
Vintage jewelry, gently used books or refurbished items can be unique, meaningful gifts. Many families are embracing this approach to reduce waste and save money.

Eco-friendly gift wrapping
Each year, millions of pounds of gift wrap end up in landfills—especially metallic, foil and glitter-covered papers, which aren't recyclable. Instead:

- Wrap gifts in brown kraft paper, easily recyclable and customizable.
- Use fabric wrap (Furoshiki style), scarves or bandanas for reusable wrapping.
- Decorate packages with twine, dried orange slices, rosemary sprigs or pinecones.
- Save and reuse gift bags, boxes, ribbons and tissue paper.

Eco-friendly Christmas choices are not about doing everything perfectly. They're about small, intentional steps that reflect gratitude—for the people we love, the traditions we hold and the Earth we share.

Better Homes & Gardens. "Sustainable Holiday Decorating Ideas." Better Homes & Gardens, Meredith Corporation, 2024, www.bhg.com/sustainable-holiday-decor/

Environmental Working Group. "Healthy and Sustainable Holiday Decorating Guide." EWG, 2023, www.ewg.org/holiday-decorating-guide

Sierra Club. "Green Your Holidays: Low-Waste Gifts and Wrapping Ideas." Sierra Club, 2023, www.sierraclub.org/sustainable-holidays

Nothing says Christmas like the comfort of hot cocoa.
This homemade peppermint cocoa mix is rich, festive and easy to assemble.
Packaged in a small reusable jar, it makes a thoughtful, low-waste gift.



Recipe Spotlight: Peppermint Cocoa Mix

A simple, sustainable Christmas gift that's cozy, delicious and low-waste

Ingredients (makes one 12-16 oz jar):

1 cup unsweetened cocoa powder
1 cup powdered sugar
1 cup powdered milk
¼ cup mini chocolate chips (optional but decadent)
¼ cup crushed peppermint candies or candy canes
¼ teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon vanilla powder (optional, adds warmth)

For gifting:

1 small reusable jar (mason jar, swing-top jar, or repurposed glass jar)
Twine or ribbon
Small paper tag

Instructions

1. Layer or Mix:
   - For a decorative look, layer the ingredients in the jar in this order: cocoa powder, powdered sugar, powdered milk, salt, chocolate chips, and crushed peppermint.
   - For a uniform mix, combine everything in a bowl before filling the jar.
2. Seal tightly and wipe the jar clean of any cocoa dust.
3. Add a tag with the following instructions for the recipient:
   To prepare: Mix 3 tablespoons of cocoa mix with 8 ounces of hot water or milk. Stir well and enjoy. For extra cheer, top with whipped cream or a peppermint stick.

You can even include a small handwritten blessing or quote to tuck alongside the jar, such as: "May your days be warm, your heart be light, and your season be filled with peace."