



Holiday Edition 2016

A Green Holiday

This issue is adapted from a newsletter written in 2012 by Scott Chase, WSU Island County Extension, and Chrys Bertolotto, WSU Snohomish County Extension

December is a wonderful time of year, when we can celebrate with friends and family, and give gifts to those we care about. This issue is meant to share ideas on how to enjoy the holiday season and yet make choices in our activities that will have the least negative impact on our environment. We hope you enjoy this issue, and wish you the happiest of holidays and a happy and healthful new year!

Choosing a tree

Which is best, a live tree or artificial? This is a difficult choice for many. Here are some things to consider when choosing a tree for your home.

Living tree

The smell of a fresh pine, spruce or fir in your living room certainly evokes the season, and the ritual of picking the perfect tree is a great family tradition. In our area, we do not have to rely on trees that are trucked in from long distances, as do people in many other states, and most that are available are grown locally on land that is not usually suited for better agricultural uses. These trees are usually raised as a sustainable crop, and trap more carbon dioxide than other tree forests. If buying from a tree lot or tree farm, check to see if they have been sprayed with pesticides, which you may not want to bring into your living room.

A live tree not only provides a wonderful smell, but that it is also biodegradable, and can be chipped into mulch, compost, or wood chips for re-use in the yard or garden. If you don't have a chipper or shredder at home, some organizations like local scout troops collect trees at the end of the season to be turned into mulch for a small fee. You can also buy a living tree at a nursery, planting it in your yard at the end of the season. If you do so, follow the nursery's instructions as to how long you can have it indoors, and how to acclimate it to being outdoors



Washington State Christmas tree farm. WSU Collections

again prior to planting. When planting, think about how close it is to the house, whether the roots will impact the drainfield, and whether it will block views in the future.

If you have a cut tree and can store it outside during the winter months, consider making it into habitat for birds and other wildlife. Stand it near your birdfeeders if you have any, offering cover for the birds. Do you have any plain (non-salted and non-flavored) bagels or bread left over from your holiday dinner or New Year's celebrations? Smear the sides with peanut butter, dip them in seed, and tie them securely to the tree with string. You can add peanut butter and seeds to any pine cones you may have, as well, and tie those to the tree. Add stings of cranberries, plain popcorn, apple pieces, grapes, berries, plain peanuts in the shell, and other bird goodies. These simple steps will provide shelter and food for the birds during the winter months ahead, while providing you hours of enjoyment in watching the various birds that enter your yard. If you have enough space, consider repurposing the tree for a brush pile, using the tree as a base and covering it with leaves, branches and twigs. This newly created habitat directly benefits wildlife during winter months by providing both food and protection from winter cold.

Artificial tree

Another popular choice is the artificial tree, available in many sizes and style, with some already strung with lights. A good choice for urban dwellers, the advantages of an artificial tree is that they can be put up earlier in the season; they don't dry out or shed needles; they can be used year after year; and in the long run are a less expensive choice. The disadvantage are that you

need to find a place to store the tree during when the season is over; they may not be as aesthetically pleasing and do not have that fresh tree odor; they are often shipped long distances, usually from China; and they are made of plastics and metals, including lead, and are not biodegradable and usually not recyclable. However, they may last a decade or more with good care.

Decorating with plants

One of the more traditional greens used for holiday decorations, whether used in wreaths or strung around the house, is English Ivy. As readers of the Shore Stewards News may know, it is also considered a Class C Noxious Weed in Washington State, meaning you are asked, but not required, to control this plant. If you have English ivy growing around your property, consider creating a plan on how to remove the ivy before it does further damage. If it is growing up your trees, which can kill them over time, cut it off at the base and try to pull it out by the roots. For more information on controlling English Ivy, see this info from King County: http://www.nwcb.wa.gov/images/weeds/english-ivy-control_King.pdf.



You can use the ivy you've pulled off the tree for decoration, then dispose of it at the transfer station at the end of the holiday season. NOTE: do not remove ivy from your neighbors' houses or other locations for decoration at your home, as you do not want to transport ivy, whose seeds can disperse and spread. But you can encourage neighbors to remove their own ivy from trees and use for their own decoration and disposal, letting them know that the ivy can kill the trees.

If you have ivy on your bluff, do not remove all of the ivy at once. Though it is shallow rooted and does not help much with bluff stability, removing it all at once can encourage erosion to your bluff. Remove the ivy from a small area, and plant that area with native plants that are better choices for bluff stability. Repeat over time, but do not jeopardize your safety or health by working on areas of the bluff that are steep, high, or unstable. Leave those areas to professionals.

Another Class C Noxious Weed that you should control is English Holly, another favorite for holiday decor. Besides having berries that are toxic to humans, English Holly will invade forest habitats. Dense thickets of holly will suppress growth of native trees and shrubs, and suppress seed germination. It requires a lot of water, and can prevent surrounding plants from having sufficient moisture to survive. Holly can grow up to 50 feet tall, and once established, can be extremely difficult to control. It is recommended that if you do keep holly for its decorative foliage, you should control it and keep it from spreading into natural areas or forests. Tall Oregon Grape is a similar looking alternative that is native to our area and also makes a festive decoration. For more information on English Holly, see this King County site: http://www.nwcb.wa.gov/images/weeds/English-Holly-Fact-Sheet_King.pdf



Save your septic system

If you are planning any large holiday gatherings this season, be sure to think about your septic system and drainfield. If you have a large number of people flushing the toilet, along with loading and running your dishwasher multiple times to handle the excess dirty dishes, you are putting a lot of extra water into your septic tank and drainfield. Add to that any guests staying over, using your bath, shower and possibly your washing machine, and you may cause a potential septic system failure. One solution for avoiding the high expenses of repairing your septic system is to consider renting a “porta-potty” or other brand of portable toilet. Not every guest can go outside to use the portable toilet, but if you explain why you have it - guests who can use it may save you the high expense of septic system repairs.



Green gifts

There are so many gifts that you can make with little effort or time. They will be more interesting than gifts bought at the mall and will be appreciated by many on your list. Of course, if your favorite teenage nephew was hoping for the latest video game, he might not appreciate a gift of homemade jam. But many adults exchange small gifts with friends, family and co-workers, and might prefer something made by you than another Santa coffee mug. Here are some ideas on simple environmentally friendly gifts you can make or purchase:

- **Reusable food storage containers:** glass containers with snap-close plastic or glass lids are found in many different stores these days, and in a variety of sizes. These are great alternatives to zip-lock sandwich and storage bags, which are usually thrown in the garbage after one use. Fill some of these with candy or your own special cookies, and you'll have a gift that will actually be used for years to come.
- **Canvas or recycled grocery bags.** No longer boring and plain, these are now available in a number of attractive designs and styles. Many new bags use materials recycled from other products, like plastic made from milk containers, and have fascinating labels explaining what they are made from. See if you can find bags that are made in the U.S.
- **Native plants:** many give a plant gift like poinsettias, which look pretty until their leaves drop, and then usually die. Consider giving the gift of a native plant. Decorate the pot to give it the festive look, and include instructions of how and where to plant in the yard, as well as information on why it is beneficial. Information on local native plants can be found at <http://green.kingcounty.gov/GoNative/Index.aspx>

- **Dustless cloth:** you can find fancy glass jars at your local thrift store; check your local antique store for an old and interesting jar. Spread several drops of lemon oil on the inside of the jar, preferably one with a screw-top lid. Put a cloth or soft rag in the jar and close it tightly. The dust cloth can be stored in the jar between washings or uses. Note: thrift stores often have an area where you can find unused fabrics with interesting designs or colors for the cloth. Cut a thin strip from the cloth to use as a “ribbon” for the outside of the jar.
- For the wildlife lover, make a long string of cranberries and plain popcorn for hanging on a tree, providing decorations that the birds can also enjoy. Or stuff pine cones with peanut butter and wild bird seeds. You can attach string for hanging, and hang them from branches, where you can watch the birds from your window.
- Field guides: there are several inexpensive field guides for your nature lover. These can enhance their experiences when walking in the forest, along trails, or on the beach. These can be found at several local bookstores and gift shops. Be sure that they are applicable to the Pacific Northwest.



Happy holidays from all of us at WSU Extension.



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