

Vol.1 Issue 21 Make It an Eco-Friendly Holiday

Our family Thanksgiving celebration hit a 20 year record high this year in the area of attendance. Even with two deployed family members, we were able to get 29 people stuffed in to my sister's ranch-style house with only a dozen of those being under the age of 18. We stayed for both the noon and evening meals and enjoyed a great day of food, fun, and a lot of generated trash.

I recently read some information provided by the Mote Marine Lab of the U.S. National Park Service in Sarasota, Florida. Did you know that it takes an unidentified amount of time for foam plates and cups to decompose in the environment? (Other sources estimate that these products will never decompose or that they take in excess of 1 million years!) Plastic beverage bottles will take 450 years, plastic bags will take 10-20 years, a waxed milk carton takes 3 months, and paper towels take 2-4 weeks. The common plastic fork and spoon are typically petroleum-based products that is estimated to take anywhere from 10 to 100 years to decompose and leaves behind very undesirable bi-products in the soil and water as it does. After reading this, I felt pretty good about our family using paper plates for the Thanksgiving meal, but I can only imagine how many plastic forks and spoons we threw away that day. My family is just one of millions that contribute to the fact that Americans generate approximately 25% more trash than normal between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day – that's a million extra tons of garbage created every week.

As we plan for our upcoming Christmas gathering where there will be both food and paper-wrapped gifts, I have been thinking how we can be more intentional about reducing our waste and choosing products that balance making the meal more convenient while also making it more environmentally friendly. Here are some (sustainable) holiday tips I have collected as my planning began:

- ★ Experts estimate that some \$4 billion of unwanted and unused gifts are bought every year. Often times this is the result of last-minute impulse purchasing. Take some time to be intentionally in your gifting and make the gifts practical – items that they need and/or use regularly.
- ★ Save time, conserve fuel, and prevent pollution by making just one or two big shopping trips and take a list so that you don't have to make follow-up trips.
- ★ Don't overlook handmade and collectible treasures in thrift and antique shops and at holiday bazaars. One of my favorite gifts is the handmade dishwashing cloths that I can throw in the laundry after each meal's cleanup (thanks, Jane!)
- ★ Give gifts that don't need to be wrapped, like gift certificates to the movie theater, the bowling alley, or retail clothing store. I like the first two suggestions

the best, because it allows the family to spend some time together in a culture that is overwhelmed with too much pulling the family members different directions.

- ★ Give your time! Make coupons for babysitting, dishwashing, lawn mowing, or (based on the weekend forecast) snow shoveling. This conserves your financial resources as a time of year when they are especially sparse.
- ★ Create wrapping paper from shopping and grocery bags, newspaper, old maps, or posters. Recycle the gift wrap from this year to use again next year. Some of my favorite memories from Christmas with grandma include reading the comic paper that she wrapped my gift in or seeing the many creases across the wrapping paper and knowing that my gift was tenderly wrapped with the same paper the year before. Thanks to grandma, I keep a stash of recycled paper, tissue, and gift boxes and bags.
- ★ Don't wrap oversized gifts in paper. Just trim them with a bow or cover them with a sheet and make a show of the unveiling.
- ★ Make sure that any Hanukkah and other candles have lead-free wicks and are made from naturally scented soy, vegetable or beeswax, not synthetically fragranced petroleum wax.
- ★ If, for whatever reason, you cannot use regular table service for your meal, use paper plates made from recycled materials and ask everyone to write their names on their cup so that they use the same cup all day long.
- ★ Don't use plastic tableware such as forks and spoons. It really takes no time at all to washes these up between the meals. If you want to short cut the process a bit, put out a dishpan with a couple of inches of soapy water in the bottom and ask your family and friends to put their utensils in the water as they finish eating so that they are easier to wash when everyone is done. This practice has been around a long time in the restaurant industry and it works!
- ★ Put perishable food away immediately after the meal. Grazing on food that has set out could lead to foodborne illness and make your family and friends very sick.
- ★ Label and date the leftovers that you put in your refrigerator and freezer. If you need more information about safe food storage, contact me and I can share additional information to help you reduce food waste.

Celebrate with your family and friends, enjoy the taste and smells of the season, and join me in being intentional about conserving energy, recycling paper and plastic, and reducing overall waste. Contact me at the Geary County Extension office 785-238-4161 if you have any questions. Wishing you the very best the season has to offer and until next time – keep living resourcefully!