

# A SUSTAINABLE CHRISTMAS

Christmas is the best time of the year for many, but the worst time of the year from an environmental perspective.

On Christmas Day last year, BBC Radio 4 broadcast a programme, "[Christmas Recycled](#)", which looked at how we could make Christmas more sustainable and less wasteful in the UK.

They looked at the presents we might buy, the wrapping paper we might use to enclose the presents, the trees and decorations we might choose and the sort of food we might enjoy.

They also looked at companies whose Christmas products are designed to be more sustainable. Where the programme has found one company offering a particular innovative scheme or produce, there must be others, perhaps near *your* locality.

And remember that recycling is not the best answer to tackling waste – reducing consumption is far better.

## Clothes

They found that Christmas jumpers, so attractive around Christmas time, usually end up as landfill or are burnt, which is both wasteful and polluting. Some companies, like [British Christmas Jumpers](#), offer Christmas jumpers made from recycled materials.

And there are companies that hire outfits, which is a much more sustainable option. The Independent has listed its top 8 clothes [rental companies](#).

And of course, we're encouraged to donate our unwanted clothes to charity.

## Presents

Presents come with packaging. 114,000 tonnes of plastic packaging will be binned not recycled at Christmas time, according to Wildlife and Countryside Link.

Each year the UK spends £700 million or more on unwanted presents, according to research done by eBay and Wealthify. Find out what people need before you buy. Offer home-baked treats. Arrange a spending limit with family and friends. Check that the items you buy are green and ethical workers properly paid, not tested on animals, sustainably sourced. Lists of ethical companies can be found by looking online. Best of all, make reciprocal arrangements with family and friends not to buy each other presents. They may be relieved!

Presents for children are an environmental headache, as they are only needed for a while before being discarded and new toys bought, because children grow out of them very quickly. Yet toys can be reused again and again.

There are companies and schemes that rent out toys. You pay a subscription and get a box of toys every month or so. When you send that box back you get another box.

There are also local schemes that take unwanted toys. And national initiatives like [Trash Nothing](#), which enable you to give away your unwanted goods – and take other people's offerings.

## Cards

The Greeting Card Association tells us that 1 billion Christmas cards are sold each year, a huge proportion of which can't be recycled because of the glitter and plastic they contain.

Organic waste can be turned into cards, which is what [Earthbits](#) in Huddersfield is doing.

Or we can use online greetings in place of actual cards, which more and more people are doing.

Do you really need to buy cards for people you see regularly? If you decide not to, explain that you are trying to reduce consumerism. Home-made cards are a great idea – people like the thought and effort that goes into them. You can use up leftover resources – cards, calendars, things around the house etc... A better idea is to send a Happy Christmas email. If you receive cards, recycle where possible, don't bin them.

### **Wrapping Paper**

In Britain every Christmas it is generally estimated that we use 227,000 miles of wrapping paper, at the expense of 50,000 trees. Lots of it is single use. There is no need to throw it away. It can be re-used many times. You can buy reusable bags, and you can buy wrapping paper made from recycled paper, or from hemp (organic hemp is one of the most sustainable fibres you can use). [Chirpy](#) in Leeds sells cloth wrapping. One company, [Wrag Wrap](#), sells cloth wrapping made from recycled bottles from post-consumer waste.

Or use attractive and re-usable cloth bought from charity shops. Use ribbon instead of tape for sealing, so that the wrapping can more easily be re-used or re-cycled. The ribbon can be re-used as well, as can any bows used.

### **Trees**

Millions of Christmas trees both real and artificial are discarded every year in the UK. To cut down on plastic dependence and to offset carbon emissions, buy a living tree, and keep it in the pot in the house or garden when not being used. It can be re-used year after year. Norfolk pines are suitable, as they don't grow large.

Many Local Councils will collect and compost your tree when you've finished with it. Or you can take it to the local recycling centre, or compost it yourself in your garden. But burning or mulching trees will release CO2 back into the atmosphere, so a rooted tree is best.

You don't even have to buy one – some companies rent out rooted trees. One company, [Rooted Christmas Trees](#), rents them, then 'retires' them at the end of their decorative life, by planting them in land where they are needed to prevent flooding.

### **Tree decorations**

There's no end to sustainable possibilities for tree decorations. Make your own out of unwanted household materials and waste, and/or out of home-baked treats. Use greenery - we could grow our own mistletoe and holly. And use LED lights, as they use up to 95% less energy than traditional bulbs. You can buy craft kits of pre-used, unwanted things like buttons, material scraps etc to make into tree decorations.

### **Alcohol**

[Toast Ale](#) sells beer made from surplus fresh bread from bakeries, which would otherwise go to landfill. This not only prevents waste, but also reduces the carbon and water footprint of beer compared to malt.

Some companies offer a refill scheme for bottles of alcoholic spirits.

### **Food**

One manufacturer estimates that each Christmas, households bin 270,000 tons of food. The waste figure for producers and supermarkets is much higher – 2 million tons of edible food waste produced each year.

Food waste has the biggest carbon footprint after the USA and China.

[FareShare](#) is an organisation that uses food that would otherwise go to landfills, to feed people.

Rotting food creates methane. But it could be used to produce energy and fertiliser instead if Councils invested in recycling food waste. At least one company in the UK is doing that, [Saria Ltd](#).

There are things you can do at home to reduce waste, such as don't cook more than you will eat, and freeze leftovers for a future meal(s).

You've probably seen headlines like "*Tackling the world's most urgent problem; meat*" (United Nations Environment Programme). Growing animals for food involve destruction and pollution of the land, forests, waters and atmosphere, and takes resources from the poorest people. Include some vegan meals over the Xmas\* period. Vegan meal recipes can be found online – at [Veganuary.com](http://Veganuary.com) for instance - and there are plenty of vegan ready meals in the shops.

### Online

When buying online, add the words "eco-friendly" to whatever you're looking to buy. You'll be surprised at the number of sustainable offerings available.

### \*'Xmas'

You may have noticed that I used the abbreviation 'Xmas' and be getting ready to write to the editor in protest.

Some Christians feel strongly that one should not abbreviate the word 'Christmas' to 'Xmas'. The abbreviation is seen as an unwanted secular downgrading of the religious season. But the origin is the Greek word 'Χριστός', meaning Christ, and Greek was the language of the Christian scriptures.

The first 2 letters of the Greek word for Christ are *chi* (resembling X) and *rho* (resembling P), which is why the Easter candle, along with a lot of traditional Catholic art and sacramentals, has the Chi-Rho sign (☩). (No argument about *that* abbreviation.)

So, whether or not one uses the 'Xmas' abbreviation is a matter of personal choice, though some feel that the abbreviation is itself a [sacred tradition](#) which should not be lost.

Let's use Christmas time to move closer to God by thinking about how we can care for His creation. Have a healthy, holy, wholesome green Christmas!

VB, Laudato Si' Animators 2023

This article takes much of its information from the BBC Radio 4 programme "*Christmas Recycled*"  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m001ghwd>