

Joyful and Waste-Free: Your Guide to Zero-Waste Holidays

By: GROW Ecological Commission

The holiday season is a time for celebration, but it also sees a significant spike in waste—from wrapping paper and single-use dishware to uneaten food. Whether a family gathering at home, annual work party, or other gathering, hosting a **zero-waste holiday event** is a fantastic way to spread cheer without spreading trash, proving that a truly festive gathering can be both spectacular and sustainable. And it's a great way to save money!

Here's your step-by-step guide to planning low-impact, high-joy December events. Choose what works for you!

Food: Local, Planned, and Loved

Food waste accounts for a huge portion of holiday waste, but smart planning can eliminate it.

- **Plan Portions Accurately:** Use an online "**Guest-imator**" or similar tool to accurately calculate how much food you need based on your headcount.
- **Source Locally:** Shop at **local farmers' markets or co-ops** to find seasonal, unpackaged ingredients, reducing both packaging waste and your meal's carbon footprint. Consider incorporating more **plant-based options**, which generally have a lower environmental impact.
- **Embrace Leftovers:** Have a plan for uneaten food. Encourage guests to **bring their own reusable containers** to take home leftovers—make it a fun "doggie bag" station! Donate non-perishable or unopened excess food to a local food bank. Compost any unavoidable food scraps.

Gifts & Wrapping

- **Gift Memories, Not Things:** Go **gift free** and focus on creating memories. If you are gifting, choose experiences (like event tickets, classes, services), shop second hand, or give something homemade.
- **Conscious Wrapping:** Wrap gifts using **reusable fabric bags, scarves, dishcloths, or newspaper** instead of conventional, non-recyclable wrapping paper or plastic ribbon.

Say No to Disposables

- **Use Reusables:** Choose **real plates, glasses, and silverware**. If you don't own enough, borrow from neighbors, friends, or rent them. Thrift shops can make for great finds. And mismatched tableware can add a charming, eclectic flair!
- **Cloth Napkins:** Swap paper napkins for **washable cloth napkins** and tablecloths.
- **Bulk Beverages:** Buy drinks in large containers instead of individual bottles or cans. Set up a water station with tap water infused with fruit or herbs, and encourage guests to **bring their own reusable water bottles** or use your glassware.

Simple & Natural Decor

- **Natural Elements:** Decorate with **natural greenery** like pinecones, branches, or dried citrus garlands. These items are beautiful and compostable.
- **DIY & Secondhand:** Use existing ornaments or make new ones from natural materials. **Thrift stores** are also excellent sources for unique, pre-loved holiday decorations.
- **Reusable Lights:** Choose **LED lights** for maximum energy efficiency, check light strands for dead bulbs before disposing of the set, and recycle old light strands at collection sites throughout the area.

Choose the changes that work for you and remember small changes add up for big impact. With a few mindful choices, events and gatherings are a great time for making memorable and beautiful moments that are a gift to your guests and the planet.

Recipe of the Month

Collard Green Wraps

makes 2 servings

This month's recipe makes for an easy on-the-go lunch during the holiday season or a veggie-packed snack to fuel your day. Try sprinkling everything bagel seasoning or other herbs/spices on the sweet potato for an added burst of flavor.

Ingredients

2 collard green leaves
1 small or medium sweet potato
2 teaspoons sesame oil
1 teaspoon pink sea salt
1 teaspoon ground black pepper
¼ cup sprouts or shredded cabbage
¼ cup bell pepper, diced
¼ cups shredded (or diced) carrots
¼ cup cucumber, chopped or cut in thin, lengthwise strips
½ an avocado, cubed (optional)

Instructions

1. Preheat the oven to 400 degrees F.
2. Wash and peel the sweet potato, then slice it into rounds about ¼-inch thick. Place the rounds in a single layer on a baking sheet and lightly coat them with sesame oil, salt and pepper. Bake for 25–30 minutes, turning over halfway through the cook time.
3. Place collard greens in a large pan with an inch of water. Cover and steam the greens over medium heat until wilted, about 2 minutes. Remove the greens from heat, drain the water and set the softened leaves aside.
4. Divide all prepped ingredients into two portions before beginning to assemble the wraps.
5. To assemble a wrap, fill a collard green leaf starting with the roasted sweet potato, followed by carrots, bell pepper, cucumber, sprouts (or cabbage) and avocado (if using). Be careful not to overfill. This will help to prevent tearing the leaf.
6. If desired, add 1–2 tablespoons of sriracha, chutney, peanut sauce, tahini or another condiment of your choosing.
7. Fold in the long sides of the leaf first. Then fold over the edge of the leaf closest to you. Keep rolling to fully seal the wrap. Repeat with the second leaf.

Source: <https://ediblemadison.com/recipes/collard-green-wraps>

Have a plant-based recipe you'd like to share with the community? Send it to GROW@westchester-il.gov for consideration for future newsletters.

Green Fact of the Month

A 2021 analysis showed “Americans generate 23% more tons of waste in December than in other months of the year”. “In 2017 nearly one-third of people who accepted a gift they didn’t like threw it in the trash. In 2019 it was found that retailers dump 5 billion pounds of returned products in U.S. landfills each year.”

Source: Center for Biological Diversity, www.simplifytheholidays.org