



Green Sense 12/15/13

## Holiday Trimmings

I was very surprised to learn that some of the old ornaments that I inherited probably have toxic metals in them! But when I thought about it, I remember that after I've hung them, my hands seem to smell a bit metallic. So I looked it up. It turns out that this is not just a thing of the past!

Decorations are a big part of our holiday season. They honor traditions, create a festive air and create a mood for merry-making. So rather than giving up on decorating, get more sustainable décor for the holidays! A number of websites (such as [www.care2.com](http://www.care2.com)) offer tips. Here's a summary:

First, for those old ornaments: Simply be careful and wash your hands after hanging them. It's always fun to make new ornaments, too. If you're 'crafty' you can make ornaments from origami, or by painting natural materials like pinecones. If you have young children (or pets) you may want to replace any ornaments that may have toxic metals.

The question of real vs. fake trees: The best choice is usually to find a living tree, one that you can plant after the holidays (or in the spring). The second choice would be natural, cut trees, which spent their lives photosynthesizing as they grew, removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere - tree farms replant after the trees are cut. When selecting your tree pull on a few branches to make sure the needles do not easily fall off. Make sure you water the tree regularly (dry indoor heat is not good for 'live' trees).

Until recently, there seemed to be little information and little choice in what artificial Christmas trees are made of. Most are from polyvinyl chloride (PVC). "Vinyl chloride, the chemical used to make PVC, is a known human carcinogen", according to the World Health Organization's International Agency for Research on Cancer. But now you can get trees made from injection-molded polyethylene (PE) plastic, which, while still a plastic, is safer. Softer Landing (search at <http://thesoftlanding.com>) provides tips on choosing a non-PVC artificial tree.

Lighting is another holiday delight: As with older ornaments, you should keep light strings out of reach of children, and adults should handle with care in case the vinyl on the wires has some lead in it to keep it flexible. Do not use lights marked for indoor use, outside. If you're in the market for new lights, first of all look for LED lights that use far less energy than incandescent. Then, check to see if you can find ones that satisfy the stricter European Restriction of Hazardous Substances Directive (RoHS) regulations (try [EnvironmentalLights.com](http://EnvironmentalLights.com)).

Some sources estimate Christmas electricity expenses can be cut down by as much as 90 percent by switching to LED lights. LED lights are also incredibly durable, and can be dropped, hit, or left outside without becoming damaged. A good time to invest in new lighting is during holiday sales.

Exchanging gifts: Gift exchanging is a big part of holiday celebrations, and as an alternative to buying wrapping paper, why not try to make your own? Wrapping paper only lasts a few minutes anyway, and there are lots of other ways to disguise presents. Re-useable bags, cloth wrapping (napkins or dishtowels can be used both for wrapping and as part of the gift), the Sunday comics, colorful magazine covers or ads, or even old maps which are quite colorful. If you buy, get paper with recycled content.

Candles: Candles are another favorite for holidays and the solstice. Better choices include candles made from soybean, palm, hemp or beeswax — or make your own fragrant holiday candles using natural ingredients.

To cut down on all the buying and wrapping, if you come from a large family, try a gift drawing each year. You only exchange with one family member or couple, instead of all. You can even set the dollar amount. Everyone gets to open a present, but everyone cuts back on purchases and all that entails, which makes for a more environmentally friendly holiday!

A column by Reading Climate Committee members Gina Snyder and Michele Benson