

# Simplify the Holidays

From the Center for a New American Dream



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No matter what you celebrate, this guide provides many meaningful ways to have **more fun with less stuff** this season!

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# Are You Dreaming of the Perfect Holiday?

If you were asked to describe the ideal holiday season, chances are you would include the company of loved ones, good food, fun and relaxation, and maybe an inch or two of snow.

It seems so simple, but for many of us, this could not be farther from reality. Too often, the holidays seem to exhaust rather than uplift us. Do you sometimes feel trapped by the shopping, spending, and frenzied preparations? Do you want your holidays wrapped more in meaning and less in stuff? If so, you're not alone.

According to a national survey, more than 3 in 4 Americans wish that holidays were less materialistic. Nearly 9 in 10 believe that holidays should be more about family and caring for others, not giving and receiving gifts. ([New Dream](#)) Yet U.S. consumers intend to spend 11% more on gifts this holiday season than in 2012. Moreover, 46% of consumers admit that they are likely to overspend their holiday budget this year (compared to 34% in 2012). ([Accenture](#))

But you don't have to rack up credit card debt or get swept up in the season's commercialism. Instead, consider creating holidays that instill more meaning into the season and encourage more sharing, laughter, creativity, and personal renewal. This guide is our attempt to help you get started. We hope the steps outlined here will help you reduce stress and increase your personal fulfillment during this holiday season.

"I was thinking recently about what I remember most about my grandparents, and I realized that I don't remember a single gift they gave me as a child. Instead, I remember the time that I spent with them."

—Erin Peters



# Retail Extravaganza

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The holiday season is arguably our greatest cultural paradox. Tradition, family, and faith are obscured by the pressures to spend. The costs of the commercialized holiday season are reflected in these statistics:

In 2012, holiday sales increased 3.5% to \$579.5 billion. By comparison, 2011's \$560.2 billion was a 5.1% increase over 2010. On average, holiday sales have increased 3.3% for the last 10 years.

[National Retail Federation](#)

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In 2012, the average holiday shopper spent \$752 on gifts, décor, greeting cards, and other items.

[National Retail Federation](#)

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As of October 2013, 53.8% of shoppers had already started holiday shopping.

[National Retail Federation](#)

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In 2012, a record 247 million shoppers (up from 226 million in 2011) shopped on "Black Friday weekend" (Thanksgiving and the three days following), spending a record \$59.1 billion.

[National Retail Federation](#)

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Nearly two in five Americans (39%) carry credit card debt from month to month. In 2013, average credit card debt per U.S. adult was \$4,878.

[CreditCards.com](#)

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Online holiday sales are expected to increase between 13% and 15% to as much as \$82 billion during the months of November and December.

[National Retail Federation](#)

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Over one-third of millennials (young people between their teens and 30s) shopped on Thanksgiving Day in 2012.

[National Retail Federation](#)

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In 2012, "Cyber Monday" (the first Monday after Thanksgiving) reached \$1.5 billion in online spending, up 17% from 2011, representing the heaviest online spending day in history and the second day in the 2012 season (in addition to Black Friday) to surpass \$1 billion in sales.

[comScore](#)

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"I simplify the holidays by managing wants versus needs with my children. Teaching them about advertising has really helped—now that they know the purpose is to sell them things, the Christmas season isn't so bad!"

—Gaylene Wey-Thoeny

# Getting Started

Before deciding how to simplify, take a moment to reflect on what kind of holiday celebration you want. Are you looking for more activities to enjoy with your children? A celebration focused more deeply on nature? New charitable or community based traditions? A clearer confirmation of your spiritual beliefs? A way to weave in your respect for the environment into the celebration? Or are you trying to reduce the stress and get a little extra time to sleep? Once you have decided what you want to do differently, it's easier to decide how to act.

When adults reflect back on their childhoods, holidays are often some of their most precious memories. What holiday memories do you want for yourself and for your children? Unfortunately, too many of us get trapped in the chaos of shopping, planning, cooking, and cleaning. We speed up so much that we never really slow down and enjoy the season. The heart and soul of the holidays often get lost.

Imagine the holidays have come and gone. The food has been eaten, the gifts have all been opened, and you are observing the aftermath. Picture the scene carefully: the way the house looks, the way you feel, what your family is doing. Once you can see the image clearly, answer the following questions.



**Does your usual celebration focus on those aspects of the holiday that you feel are most important?**



**Which parts of your celebration would be the easiest to change so that you could spend more time on the things that are most meaningful for you?**



# Time and Stress

List all the holiday-related tasks for which you were responsible last year (e.g., buying gifts, making cards, decorating the house, guests, etc.).

Put a star next to the activities you truly enjoyed. Look at your list and consider the following questions:



Which activities could you scale back to reduce stress?



Where can you enlist help to make tasks easier and more fun?



Which activities could you cut out altogether?



Which activities do you find particularly enriching, and worthy of more time and effort?

## Admiration Booklets

“One year, my immediate family (parents and siblings) decided that we really didn’t need to buy each other gifts. So instead, we all wrote something we love or admire about each other. I collected these comments and created a little booklet for each person containing all of the comments. At our get-together, each person got a booklet of all of the qualities that people like about them. I love this idea because it really allows you to express your admiration and support for the people you love. It’s a great keepsake and it definitely brought us together more than a new pair of slippers would!”

—Kindle Fahlenkamp-Morell

# Gifts and Spending

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Try to remember how much money you spent last year on gifts, decorations, and overall celebration-related items during the holiday season. If necessary, estimate your bills, but if your bank and credit card statements from last year are available, do your best to get an accurate picture of what your actual costs were. Don't forget to add in the price of wrapping paper, food for entertaining, and any last-minute "stocking stuffers" or other extras you may have purchased, too. Calculate what percentage of your annual income this amounts to.

Amount: \_\_\_\_\_

Percentage of annual income: \_\_\_\_\_

Are you comfortable with this figure? Is the amount you spend on the holidays greater than your yearly electric bill? Your annual savings? Your annual charitable giving? Did you put any of these expenses on a credit card, and if so, how long did it take to pay off the credit debt? The purpose of this exercise isn't to make you feel guilty, but to give you some perspective.

Often, we are simply not conscious of how much is flying out of our wallets during the rush of the season. Seeing the total amount added up can provide some resolve to track expenses more carefully, however. If you don't feel the level of enjoyment you received justified the amount you spent, try setting a budget to spend less.

# Budgeting

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For many people, overspending is the biggest source of stress at holiday time.

We all want to show our loved ones that we care about them, but we don't need to go broke in the process. If financial concerns have the potential to ruin your holiday, set a holiday budget well ahead of time that weighs the money you have available against your obligations. Then, reconsider your obligations.

Take another look at what you spent last year, outlined in the exercise above. If you paid \$200 to prepare a large, fancy meal for your extended family, could you spend \$30 this year on a simpler main course and ask guests to bring side dishes? If you spent \$10 on wrapping paper, could you use children's artwork or maps from your travels as a free alternative this year? (The tips that follow will help with creative ways to save money.)

Every budget is unique, but the bottom line should be a figure you can cover without credit debt over the months leading up to the holiday. Calculate a total amount you are comfortable with, then plan a budget that is roughly half of what you know you can afford. This gives you a cushion against all those little extras that spring up unexpectedly. It's also a good idea to record your holiday purchases as you make them.

Keeping a running tally of your expenses (in a memo pad in your purse or a sheet of paper in your wallet) will help you track how well you are sticking with your budget. If you predict that overspending will be a problem, make a rule to do all of your holiday shopping with cash. This reduces the chance that you will buy on impulse, limits your spending to the amount you choose to bring into a store, and won't cost you anything in interest.

# Waste

Americans generate an average of 25 % more waste, or 1 million extra tons per week, between Thanksgiving and Christmas, with the trash almost doubling right after the holidays. Isn't it possible to celebrate without leaving a trail of trash that will stay in the landfills long after the season has passed?

Picture the bags of garbage you put on the curb last year and visualize what was inside. Then complete this exercise to identify areas where you can prevent waste before it starts.

## Holiday Waste Audit

- What are all the waste-generating activities
- Food waste (serving too much at parties)
- Energy waste (incandescent lights)
- Tree/other decorations
- Paper: cards, wrapping paper, boxes
- Plastic: drink containers, packing

Now consider durable items that turned out to be anything but—the new stuff that ended up in the trash or forgotten in a closet over the year. What broke, wore out prematurely, or was never really used?

- Kids' toys
- Clothes
- Appliances
- Other

1. Consider using these items for a re-gift party (see page 16) or donate to charity.

2. Find strategies to avoid accumulating these short-lived gifts that are a poor fit. Communicate your gift-giving preferences to friends ahead of time. (see page 7)





# Talk to Your Family

If you are planning to change your usual holiday celebrations and rituals, talk to your family about it ahead of time and get their feedback. Explain why you want to make a change. Assure everyone that you want to emphasize the traditions that foster the greatest sense of meaning and connection, and that you don't want to take anything away from the holiday. Skeptics may change their minds after giving a few new ideas a try. You may also be pleasantly surprised by who shares your concerns and enthusiasm.

Some families will resist any kind of change. This doesn't mean you can't gradually incorporate new practices into your usual rituals. Creatively planned activities and thoughtful homemade gifts will often win over cynical friends and relatives, and even the smallest changes in your routines can make you feel better about your holiday while reducing your impact on the environment.



Create a meaningful holiday wish list for your family on [SoKind, New Dream's alternative gift registry](http://SoKind, New Dream's alternative gift registry)!



[www.sokindregistry.org](http://www.sokindregistry.org)

"Last Christmas, my mom and I hosted a "Create-a-gift" party for my family where everyone got together, had some snacks, spent some time together, and made hand-made gifts for one another. My mom and aunt worked on making no-sew quilts, my Grandma and I baked dog biscuits for the many animal lovers in our family.... Everyone was surprised by how much fun they had and hopefully it will become a family holiday tradition!"

—Chantel Buck

# Simple Gift Ideas

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Here are gift ideas that celebrate the holiday season without overwhelming family time, credit cards, or landfills. For even more ideas, check out [SoKind](#), New Dream's alternative gift registry—and create your own SoKind holiday wish list!

## Homemade Gifts


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You do not have to be an artist, or even exceptionally creative, to make a great gift for someone. And while it does take some time to make a gift, it may be no more than the time you spend hunting for a parking spot and shopping at the mall.


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 Homemade salsa, pasta sauce, jam, and baked goods all taste much better than store-bought versions. Include the recipe.


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 Construct a rope swing, painted wooden blocks, or sandbox for a child.

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 Make a family calendar marked with important dates, such as birthdays, anniversaries, and family gatherings. Decorate the calendar with family photos.

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 Assemble a family quilt (from recycled fabric), collage, or other project that can be added to every year, with kids' contributions reflecting their growth. Large families can take turns sharing possession of the quilt during the year.

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Make sachets out of old fabric and herbs; dip beeswax candles colored with old crayons, or make potpourri.

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Make your own homemade [green cleaning products](#) (and maybe offer one cleaning demonstration).

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Make your own soap or personal care products (scrubs, conditioners, bath mixes), put them in a recycled glass jar, and include the recipe.

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Mix jars of dried tea out of bulk fair trade teas and/or bulk herbs like rose hips, lavender, chamomile, mint, etc. Include a mesh tea strainer.

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Re-pot herbs or house plant clippings—include a hanging planter made of braided recycled fabric.

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Record interviews with relatives. You can ask them to share memories of the person you plan to give the recording to, or tell stories of your family history.



Prepare homemade soups or dinners that can be frozen for future use.



Give away the last great book you bought and enjoyed to someone with similar taste. This could be the start of a book exchange that lasts all year round.



Plant a tree or perform some other “random act of kindness” in your recipient’s honor.



Put together a list of favorite family recipes. Variations: customize a “locavore” recipe book with seasonal recipes for the recipient’s location. Create an organic, fair-trade, or creative leftover reuse-themed recipe book.



Have a “re-gift” swap. We all have gift-quality things in our closets we don’t actually use (many left over from holidays past, still in the box). Get together with a few like-minded friends and trade them for items that fit your gift list. Or, use websites like [Craigslist.org](http://Craigslist.org), [Throwplace.com](http://Throwplace.com), and [Freecycle.org](http://Freecycle.org) to barter and “shop” for gently used gifts.



Give a gift-exemption voucher, explaining that the recipient needn’t feel obliged to get a gift for you.



Pass on possessions that you no longer use but would be useful to others (e.g., a sewing machine to someone who wants to learn to sew). Share the history of the article with the recipient.



Celebrate your loved ones—write your friend or family member a letter listing all their qualities you admire.





## Gifts of Time

This is a wonderful option for just about anyone, from the person who “has everything” to the elderly relative who would most appreciate your companionship. A particularly nice way to give the gift of time is by creating a [voucher](#) or “[coupon](#)” that describes the gift being given.



Special activities with a loved one—a candlelight dinner, massage, or picnic.



A month of taking out the garbage, doing the dishes, shoveling the snow, cleaning the cat box, or performing other household chores.



A monthly lunch date with an elderly relative or friend.



Babysitting  
Car washing  
An outing to a zoo, museum, or park  
Dinner at a favorite restaurant  
A canoe, boat, train, or balloon ride  
A hiking, camping, biking, or swimming trip  
Dog walking or pet sitting



Help someone green their home: give them a boost with a compost bin, insulation project, water efficiency improvements, or other task they may have a hard time starting on their own.



For a relative or friend you tend to only be in touch with at the holidays, make a commitment to contact them throughout the year.

## Gifts of Experience

Some gifts are not tangible, but are a chance for the recipient to try something new. This kind of gift can provide memories that last forever, without the need for more stuff.



Sign someone up for lessons in a sport, drawing, a language, or a musical instrument.



Offer to teach a skill you possess, such as canning, swing dancing, knitting, furniture-making, or doing the butterfly stroke.



Offer free services in one of your skill areas—such as photography, gardening, or financial planning.



Support the local art scene: give tickets to a community theater or a membership to a museum.

“On Christmas morning, we wake up and put together bags of snacks and put some hot cider in a thermos, then we head out in the car. We stop at every intersection with a homeless person and give them a meal and hot cider. Because we see the homeless on street corners every day, we tend to forget about what they’re going through. So this is our way of reconnecting to our fellow human being in need.”

—Kelly Holmes

# Gifts to Charity

The commercialized holiday culture encourages everyone to focus on getting stuff, for our kids and ourselves. But many religious traditions instruct us that true joy and purpose come from focusing on the needs of others. This year, consider more gifts of charity that touch the hearts and lives of people who are less privileged.



Donate to a cause in the name of a family member. Some families make gifts to charities and then present family members with a coupon or card indicating that the gift was made in their name.



Sponsor a child refugee, support a homeless shelter, or protect an acre of rainforest.



Buy renewable energy certificates to offset the carbon emissions of a friend burning fossil fuel.



Set aside a few hours to volunteer in your community.



Call your local social services agency and anonymously give food, clothing, and money to a particular family in need.



Designate an amount of money to donate to charity and let your kids pick which causes will receive it. Older children can research organizations that match your family's values.



Participate in an alternative winter break: Individuals and families can participate in service projects in the U.S. and abroad.



Volunteer to bring cheer to a shelter, nursing home, or hospital.



Run a donation drive at work or at church. Toy drives are the most common, but you can also collect coats for the homeless, clothes (especially children's clothes), shoes, or food.

## What is an Alternative Gift Fair?

Imagine a shopping list that, instead of expensive sweaters, knick-knacks, and video games, contained solar cookers for refugees in Kenya, gently used secondhand items, volunteer hours for a community project, and a beautiful piece of art by a local artist. This is exactly the kind of list you could have if you shopped at an alternative gift fair. Alternative gift fairs prioritize meaning over materials, and promote a gift-giving tradition of the holiday season without the wastefulness and commercialization of conventional shopping.

No alternative gift fairs near you? Host your own! Check out New Dream's [how-to webinar recording](#) as well as our [Guide to Holding an Alternative Gift Fair](#).












# Gifts for Children

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


Instead of making a contribution to the broken toy pile in your child's room, give your kids gifts they can't break. Like an outing to the movies or a membership to your local children's museum. "Adopt" a zoo animal in their name. Or make a voice recording of yourself reading their favorite book. Want to get family and friends on board? Create a holiday wish list on [SoKind](#), New Dream's alternative gift registry dedicated to more fun and less stuff!

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## Gather the materials that appeal to a child's sense of play:

-  sock puppets made from old socks or single mittens and gloves, with buttons sewn on for eyes
-  empty food boxes, play money, and a cash box for running an imaginary store
-  old business forms, rubber stamps, and file folders to play office
-  scrap wood, cardboard, shingles, a small hammer, non-toxic paint, etc. for building a clubhouse, and a map that shows where it can be built
-  silk nightgowns, wild shoes, silly ties, and hats for playing dress-up
-  a cookbook with simple, healthy recipes
-  gardening tools, seeds, and pots of soil for indoor gardening
-  a book of skits or plays
-  a treasure hunt with a series of mysterious clues for children to follow
-  a subscription to a magazine that explores the larger world, like [Ranger Rick](#) or [National Geographic Kids](#)
-  offer to throw an "unbirthday" party in any month a child wishes, with a choice of party themes

Have you ever noticed that sometimes very small kids are happier with the wrapping paper than the present? Often, the less complicated a gift is, the more it engages a child's imagination. So, consider stuffing a stocking with these timeless toys:

-  a bag of marbles, polished rocks, sea shells, or foreign coins
-  a magnifying glass
-  a telescope
-  a stamp and stamp pad
-  building blocks
-  modeling clay or homemade play dough
-  a homemade sock monkey
-  a drawing pad and crayons or other art supplies



# Gifts for Grandparents

Grandparents often benefit the most from nontraditional gifts. For those elders who already have all the material goods and comforts that they need, consider instead a gift that honors their role in your life:



Arrange and frame a family tree photo collage.



Have all the children and grandchildren write stories or draw pictures of meaningful experiences or lessons they learned from grandparents.



Give a gift that returns a present from your childhood or past. For example, if your grandmother knit sweaters for you each winter, learn to knit or crochet a simple scarf to show your admiration for her work.



“My parents have been married over 60 years. In that time they’ve accumulated a lot of ‘stuff.’ Our family decided to have a ‘garage sale Christmas’ this year. We are going to pull all the ‘stuff’ out of the upstairs storage under the eaves and set it out for Christmas. Mom and Dad save because they don’t have to buy gifts on a fixed income. We get some unique item of choice that will have meaning because it came from them.”

—Linda Armour

## Low-Waste Wrapping

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Tearing open a gift always brings a thrill, but wrapping with virgin paper and plastic ribbons spends a lot of resources on those few seconds' thrill. Consider that 38,000 miles of ribbon alone is thrown out annually—enough to tie a bow around the Earth.

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Don't send any wrapping materials to the landfill this year. Consider the following alternatives to store-bought gift wrap:

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Newspaper comics or paper bags decorated with markers, potato stamps, or drawings.

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Maps, fabric remnants, thrift store cloth, old calendars, or other repurposed materials.

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Reuse gift boxes from last year or repurpose other boxes around the house like cereal boxes.

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Give the gift of reusable gift bags: sew these simple bags that can prevent waste year after year.

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Decorate with old ribbons, ties, scarves, beads, and paper snowflakes.

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Skip the wrapping altogether and opt for a scavenger hunt with clues.



## Shipping

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When shipping gifts, look for packaging made from recycled materials or seek out repurposed materials of your own. Before ordering online, find out what kind of packaging will come with a purchase, to avoid the predicament of green gifts enclosed with Styrofoam peanuts.

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*Boxes.* Supermarkets, liquor stores, and other businesses will often give away large, sturdy boxes for free, sometimes with packing material inside.

*Packing materials.* Inside the box use crumpled newspaper, folded cardboard, or even real (unbuttered) popcorn to cushion gifts

*Tape.* Gummed tape requires a sponge and a little extra time and effort, but it saves on the plastic tape sent to the landfill.



# Decorating Materials

One person's trash is another person's tree trimming. Look for ways to turn heirlooms, thrift store finds, and upcycled materials into low-waste holiday cheer.

*Paper.* Used paper can be folded into [origami](#), layered as a collage, or made into a wreath. Create a [garland](#). Or make your own paper out of scraps. Magazines can be rolled into [colorful beads](#).

*Cardboard.* Empty food boxes and used packing materials can provide the backing for wreaths or the basis of [ornaments](#) and [centerpieces](#).

*Plastic.* Learn how to knit plastic bags into “[plarn](#).” Cut soda bottles into [ornaments](#). Transparent plastic wrappers create stained-glass effects.

*Shiny stuff.* Potato chip bags, nutrition bar wrappers, and other silvery packaging contain Mylar. Cut out shapes for wrapping or make confetti for a [home-made snow globe](#).

*Glass and china.* Create a mosaic using shards of china or glass. Heirloom bowls and pretty thrift-store glasses are the start of a festive centerpiece.

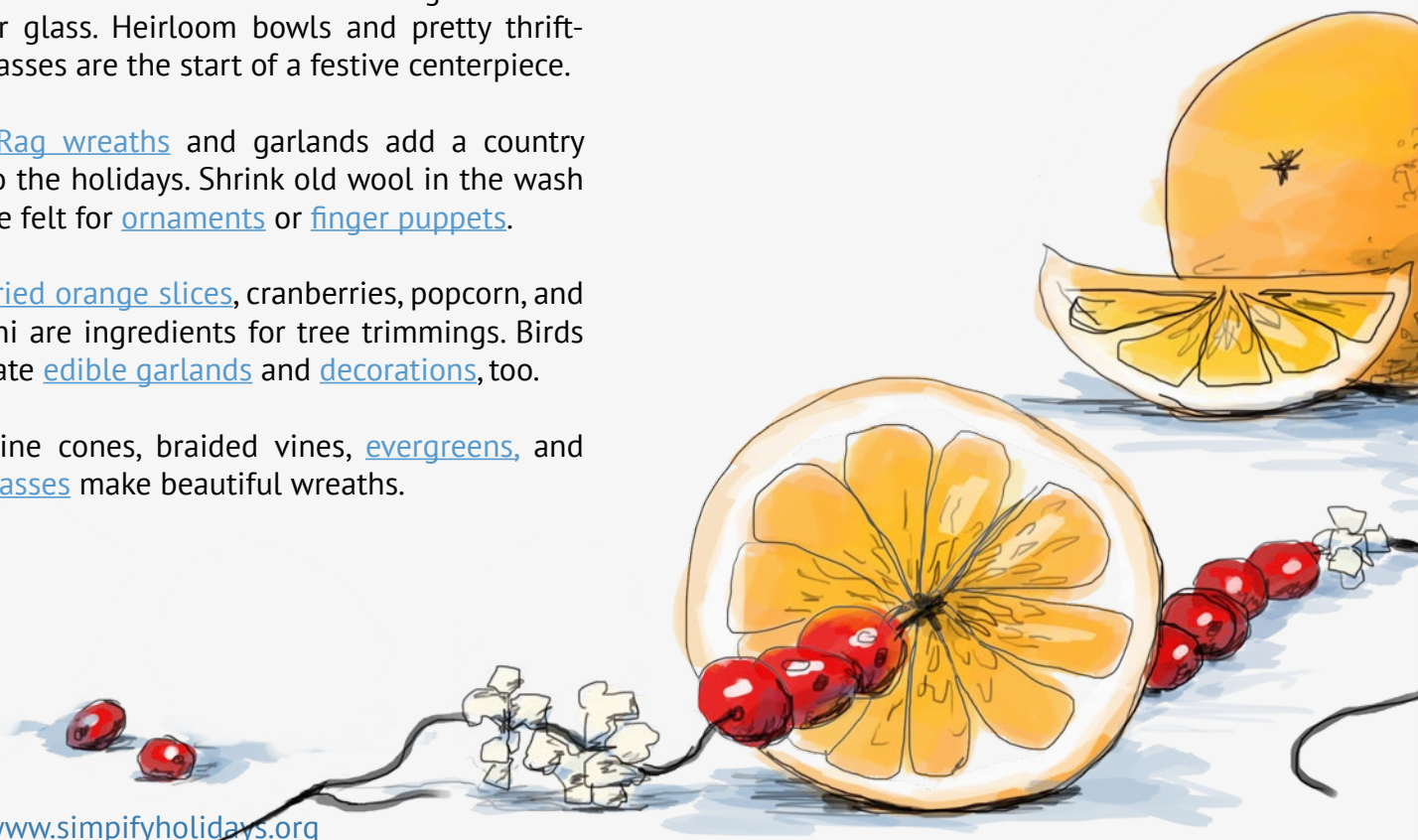
*Fabric.* [Rag wreaths](#) and garlands add a country touch to the holidays. Shrink old wool in the wash to create felt for [ornaments](#) or [finger puppets](#).

*Food.* [Dried orange slices](#), cranberries, popcorn, and macaroni are ingredients for tree trimmings. Birds appreciate [edible garlands](#) and [decorations](#), too.

*Flora.* Pine cones, braided vines, [evergreens](#), and [dried grasses](#) make beautiful wreaths.

“Instead of buying a whole bunch of fancy ornaments for our Christmas tree, our family would make the kids make ornaments out of clay, or pine tree cones, or cloth every year. They range from funny (when I was three I drew a robot on a piece of cloth with a Santa hat) to touching (the year our uncle passed on we all made angels) and always are the most valued.”

—Joshua Key-Maginnis





# Change Gift-Giving Traditions

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For extended families, office parties, or families with grown children, the usual custom of getting a brand new gift for each person on your list can be excessive. Try one of these fun ideas for reducing the number of material gifts while keeping the fun spirit of a gift swap.

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Have a [“Yankee Swap”](#) or [“White Elephant Party.”](#) Each person brings one wrapped second-hand item in good condition to the party and all the gifts are arranged on a table. Everyone draws numbers and the first person picks a gift from the table and unwraps it. The second person can either choose another gift, or take the first person’s gift (in which case the first person chooses again). Continue opening and “stealing” each other’s presents until all are opened. This shifts the focus from getting more and more to creatively exchanging just a few things in a fun way.

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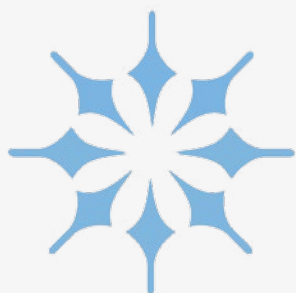
For large gatherings, get everyone together in advance, put all the names in a hat, and have each person draw the name of one other person to buy for. Everyone still has the fun of giving and receiving, but not the excess and expense of every person giving to each other person.

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Designate a dollar limit on gifts in advance. The lower the limit, the more creative the gift ideas get, especially if humor is the goal. You would be surprised how much laughter you can evoke by spending a dollar or two at a yard sale.

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If you celebrate Hanukkah, shift the focus to avoid giving gifts for eight consecutive evenings. Consider having a theme for each night: hosting a family party, working on a charity project together, making homemade presents or baked goods for others, playing games, etc.—with gift-giving as only one night’s focus.

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# Connect With Your Children

Many of us are looking for new ways to connect with our children during the holidays. If you would like to create some holiday rituals, especially for kids, here are some suggestions:

Help kids put on a holiday play, talent show, or puppet show. Pick a well-known play or movie and assign roles in unconventional ways.

Take them caroling. This community-building activity is particularly enjoyable when friends and relatives are visiting so that the group of children is large. Be sure to make multiple copies of song sheets!

Make latkes, chocolates, a gingerbread house, or other treats.

Hand-dip candles together for a menorah, kinara, or advent wreath.

Help your children prepare gift boxes for the homeless (filled with items like food, treats, and personal care items). This can be done jointly with a few families and is a gentle way to teach kids to appreciate their own good fortune and instill the values of community service and kindness to others.

Bake [easy dough ornaments](#)—either freeform or using cookie cutters. Basic recipe: 2 cups all-purpose flour, 1 cup salt, 1 cup water.

Take a trip to a local farm, artisan bakery, or craft shop to teach kids how food and handicrafts are made.

Stamp recycled paper with a cut potato dipped in paint.

Get out in nature: plant a tree, pick up trash by a stream, or go on a hike, bringing along a nature book to identify plants and birds.

Give a present to the birds: make a [homemade birdfeeder](#) out of a plastic bottle, milk carton, jug, or coffee can. Together you can look up the bird species that visit and learn to recognize them.

Make a hummingbird feeder using any clear bottle with a screw- or snap-on top.

## Remember Your Elders

We tend to focus on children during the holidays, but this can also be the perfect time of year to connect with our elders. We are all so busy with our normal routines the rest of the year that it is easy to put off that visit to an elderly friend or relative. Before we realize it, months have gone by. This year, schedule special time with a senior citizen who enjoys the company of your family.

# Simpler Entertaining

For some people, entertaining can be a major holiday stress. Before we even reach Halloween, we are bombarded with images of extravagant decorations and elaborate holiday recipes. With these standards, a simple party can become a monstrous task. The first step in making holiday events more manageable is to decide that you are willing to give up perfection. If you accept that your gathering will not look exactly like the cover of a magazine, you might be able to enjoy it more.

Here are some ideas to simplify your party, whether it's a large or small gathering:

Have a party featuring all local foods

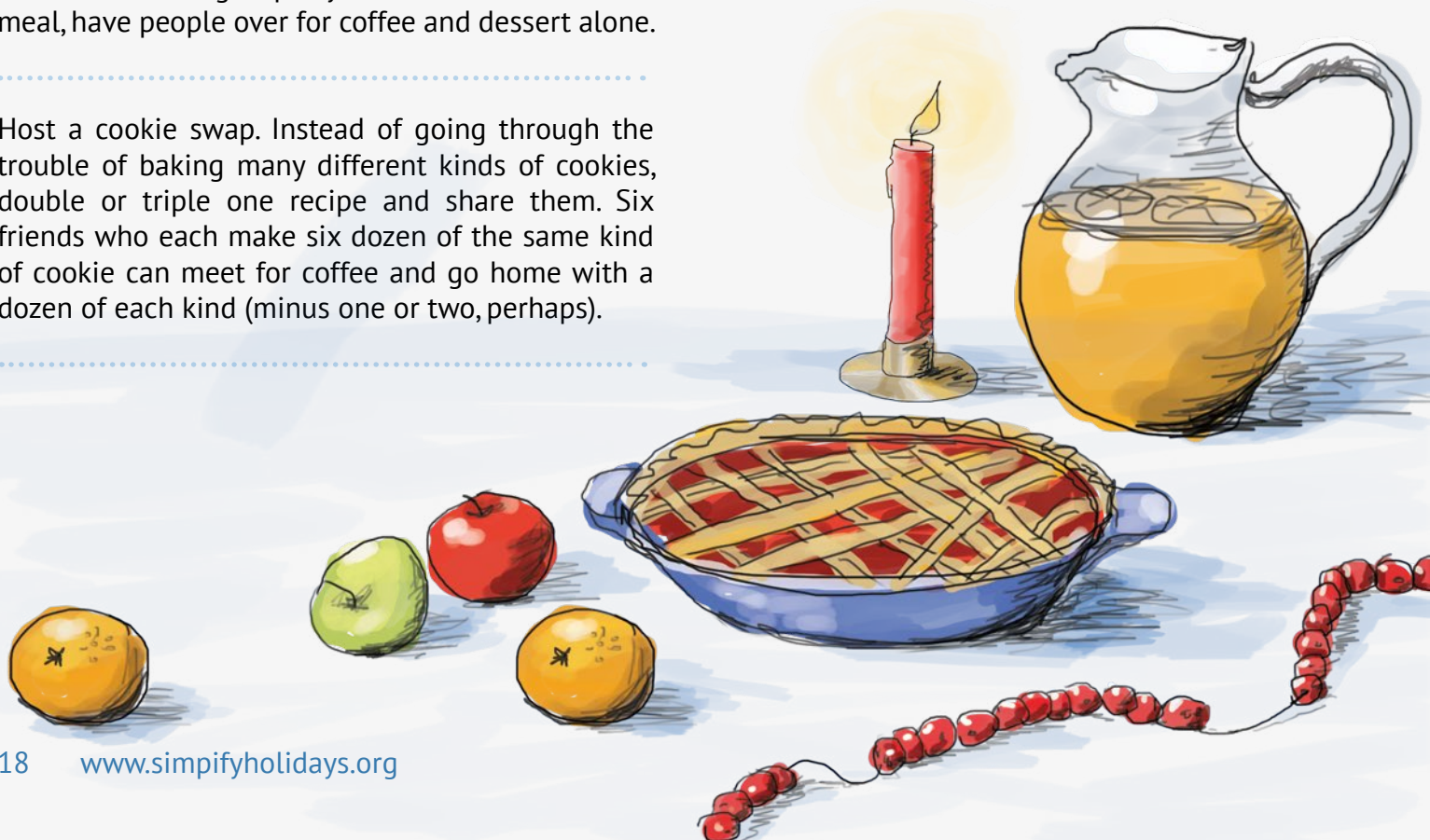
If friends and relatives are willing, have a gourmet potluck party instead of doing all the cooking yourself. The food can still be scrumptious, but each person cooks only one dish!

Instead of having a party centered around a full meal, have people over for coffee and dessert alone.

Host a cookie swap. Instead of going through the trouble of baking many different kinds of cookies, double or triple one recipe and share them. Six friends who each make six dozen of the same kind of cookie can meet for coffee and go home with a dozen of each kind (minus one or two, perhaps).

Throw a decorating party where people bring materials to make decorations from ideas on page 15.

Delegate some of the decorating, especially if you have young helpers in your home.





# Holiday Advice from Fellow New Dreamers

"The year I put the most thought and care into gifts was a year that we were living on one unemployment check. My husband was taking slides of wildlife but had no way to show them; I gave him a used slide projector that someone was selling. I hated our formica dining table and wanted a wooden one; he gave me a nice tablecloth and napkins to conceal it. We spent the least and yet gave the most heartfelt presents that year."

—Kathy Cole

"Our family has not done away with gift giving entirely, but we have created a ritual to make the entire process more mindful and conscious. Raising the consciousness of gift giving can certainly lead to less waste, more simplicity, and more of what matters. We started a tradition about six years ago wherein we all write out several gratitudes on little slips of paper either throughout the year, during the days leading up to Christmas, or for some, on Christmas morning, to be placed in a decorative container on Christmas morning. As we all gather together to share time together and exchange a few gifts, before anyone opens a gift, each individual gets the opportunity to dip into the container and read one of the slips for all to hear and guess who said what. All involved are 'present' to what is being spoken and what is happening as we all watch one person at a time open their gift.... We are especially grateful for this tradition since we have recently lost one of our children prematurely at age 23 and are blessed to have shared these intimate mindful holidays with him and to hold in our hearts, the memories that will live there forever."

—Colleen Bogner

"Our children gets lots of presents at Christmas time, so instead of everybody getting another gift from Santa Claus, he brings our family only one gift, but it is always 'something that brings the family together.' So, as a family, we've been given family games, kits to make things ourselves, and when the children were little, cookies with supplies to decorate them."

—Amy Mann

"My daughter-in-law brings a bag of items to our family holiday gathering and passes it around. Everyone is encouraged to take at least one item from the bag. Items often in the bag: a decorated pillow case, a bracelet, a coin purse, a scarf, a CD case, a candle or other home decoration. Anything she no longer wants or needs that others may still appreciate. It is always fun to look in the bag and find a treasure."

—Pat Fuller

"This year we are doing away with sending holiday cards. Not only does this task cause much stress (picking out the perfect card, organizing addresses of friends and family) but it creates a ton of waste! These cards get thrown away once the holidays are over. Instead, I plan on continuing to send family pictures via email throughout the year."

—Maresa Glass

"We use and reuse gift bags when possible. Another fun thing to do is wrap gifts using odd boxes and the Sunday comics as wrapping paper. Recipients' facial expressions are a hoot! My cousins were totally baffled as to why we were giving them granola bars (their faces betrayed the confusion coupled with the desire to be polite) until they found the framed mini sketch of the English countryside wrapped inside. Priceless, and fully recyclable."

—Alice Hall

"I give alternative gifts! Instead of buying family and friends even more stuff that they don't need, I give a gift in their honor to a humanitarian or environmental cause. They get a card (that they can recycle after reading), someone in need gets clean drinking water, a scholarship to attend school, or chickens to earn income, and we all get a holiday 'warm fuzzy.'"

—Quay Roberts

## Further Reading

- [A Mindful Christmas](#), by Barbara Kilikevicius
- [How the Grinch Stole Christmas](#), by Dr. Seuss
- [Hundred Dollar Holiday](#), by Bill McKibben
- [Simplify Your Christmas](#), by Elaine St. James
- [The Gift of Nothing](#), by Patrick McDonnell
- [Unplug the Christmas Machine](#), by Jo Robinson & Jean Coppock Staeheli
- [What Kids Really Want That Money Can't Buy](#), by Betsy Taylor
- [Winter Solstice Celebrations for Families and Households](#), by Selena Fox
- [Whose Birthday Is It, Anyway?](#), by Alternatives for Simple Living

# About the Center for a New American Dream

## Who are we and why are we doing this?

The Center for a New American Dream helps Americans consume responsibly to protect the environment, enhance quality of life and promote social justice.

Through outreach programs like the [Simplify the Holidays campaign](#), we are working to promote sustainable lifestyles that will ensure a healthy planet for future generations. We hope this brochure is useful to you and we look forward to hearing your comments and observations. Please contact us anytime at [newdream@newdream.org](mailto:newdream@newdream.org).

Sincerely,  
The New Dream Staff  
[www.newdream.org](http://www.newdream.org)

We want to cultivate a new American dream—one that emphasizes community, ecological sustainability, and a celebration of non-material values, while upholding the spirit of the traditional American dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

New Dream envisions a society that pursues not just “more,” but more of what matters—and less of what doesn’t.

## Please help us grow.

Our work depends on the generosity and support of people like you. By [joining](#) and [donating](#) to New Dream, you will be helping us to:

Inspire, engage, and challenge Americans to re-examine their cultural values on consumption and consumerism. (See our [Redefining the Dream program](#))

Provide tools and support to families, citizens, and activists to counter our consumerist culture and to create new social norms about how to have a high quality of life and a reduced ecological footprint. (See our [Beyond Consumerism program](#))

Provide resources and support to community members to create local initiatives that build local capacity and leadership, increase environmental sustainability, and foster greater livability. (See our [Collaborative Communities program](#))





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Center for a New American Dream

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