

Season's Greenings

Holiday shopping with the earth in mind



by Meaghan Boice-Green

I saw the first one in early October. I wasn't as surprised as I would have been a few years ago, but it still seemed a bit early. As intended, it instilled the age-old question: the holidays are coming... what will I get everyone?

I am talking, of course, about store holiday displays. Stores used to have the courtesy to wait at least until after Halloween to encourage us to buy, buy, buy for the season of celebration, but no longer.

While the leaves change to red, many retailers are promoting "going green." As they head into the gift-giving season, stores everywhere are cashing in on growing awareness that what we buy affects the planet that supports us. You can't browse in a big-box store without seeing a product that claims to be "green;" companies are touting the earth-friendly colors of everything from cosmetics to cleaning products to SUVs. So, as I pondered my festive shopping duties, I wondered if I could make choices that were light on the earth.

In late November I decided to venture out on my first shopping trip of the holiday season. I grabbed my reusable shopping bags and headed downtown, determined to make my purchases as eco-friendly as possible.

My first stop was a country cooperative about four miles from my house. Despite the pricey-sounding title, this small-town cooperative featured reasonably priced Americana-type crafts, antiques and county decorations in tiny stalls throughout the store. While they don't take out large ads in the Sunday newspaper, small shops like this one provide a place to find goods more likely to be made with local materials—or at least with local labor—than a mall or big-box store. In the United States, the lion's share of the oil we consume is used for transportation, not only of people but of goods. Shopping as close to home as possible and

purchasing products that are locally made can drastically reduce the amount of fossil fuels used to bring products to us.

Browsing the store, I found a purse made from a pair of old jeans. It was lined with purple fabric and had a purple sash through the belt holes—perfect for my lavender-loving sister. It was the kind of purchase that feels doubly good: buying a product made of recycled material while supporting a local entrepreneur. And it was affordable!

Finding products made of recycled material is not always as easy as this, but more and more companies are adding recycled content to their products. Products labeled "post-consumer recycled" are the best, because it means the product contains items collected from consumers (e.g. curbside recycling programs). Products usually list a percentage of their content that is post-consumer recycled. The higher the percentage, the better!

"Post-industrial recycled" is another term popping up on product packaging. It means that the product contains material leftover in the making of a different product. This extra material may otherwise end up in a landfill.

Satisfied with my purse acquisition, I walked down the street to a local consignment shop to search for an outfit for my four-year-old niece. Consignment shops and thrift stores offer gently used goods, usually at a much better price than buying new products. I found a cute little pink outfit with a fairy on it in my niece's size. At \$3, it was a win for my wallet as well as the earth! I also picked up a toy cash register for her younger brother, at half what it would have cost me brand new. At his age, he wouldn't notice the box was missing.

Next stop: the local book store. This particular book store also sells coffee and children's toys. For my mother-in-law who loves coffee, I scanned the coffee shelves for a brand

that is certified as "Fair Trade." Fair trade certification means that the coffee growers got a fair deal for their part in producing that coffee; they are not subject to sweatshop conditions. A fair deal for workers also means a fair deal for

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the planet, since production methods that protect workers usually also protect natural resources, helping to create a more sustainable future. Beyond coffee, you can also find clothing, tea and housewares that are fairly traded. Groups like the Fair Trade Federation (www.fairtradefederation.org) provide information on companies that take the health of workers and the health of our planet into consideration.

After that: a big-box retailer. My husband really wanted a new TV—a much bigger purchase than I'd normally consider, but our current set was barely hanging on, with a cracked frame, a remote control held together with duct tape, and a less-than-reliable picture. As I strolled down the aisles of televisions, I searched for the EnergyStar® label, a clear indicator of TVs that exceed government-required energy standards. Many

people think of EnergyStar® when shopping for appliances, but you can find EnergyStar® television sets, computers, printers, copiers, and even windows, doors and furnaces! And energy-efficient products mean lower utility bills.

Overwhelmed by the choices in this big-box store, I opted to learn more about my TV buying options on the EnergyStar® website, energystar.gov, when I got home. The website even includes links to special manufacturer's promotions, which could save me even more money. Then I could make a truly informed choice.

On to the office supply aisle to get a ream of paper for my computer printer. The first ream I looked at had the three-arrow recycling symbol on it. However, the symbol by itself only means that an item potentially can be recycled, not that it is made of recycled material. It also doesn't mean recycling it is realistic—for example, some companies mark their plastic wrap as recyclable, even though there are virtually no recycling programs available for plastic wrap.

I was in luck—the next ream I spied was marked with the magic words: "100% post-consumer recycled paper." I tossed it in my cart.

Susan L. Shafer



When you buy locally, you help reduce emissions from large trucks and other transport vehicles. Buying locally also means fresher and tastier foods, and small farmers stay in business.



Green Shopping

Consignment shops and thrift stores are great places to find gently used products for a fraction of their new price. In addition, you can try local church bazaars and online reuse sites if you are looking to shop more eco-friendly. Sites that offer sustainably made, recycled, or reusable goods and products include craigslist.com, greatgreengoods.com and ecomall.com. In addition, the website freecycle.org acts as a catalyst for people to give and get reusable items for free.

If you prefer to shop at box stores or supermarkets, there are certain things you, as an environmental-savvy consumer, should be aware of. In a process called “greenwashing,” companies use words like “natural,” “organic” and “recycled” to make their product sound more earth-friendly. In reality, the product may have no special qualities at all. Instead, look for labels like, “**Fair Trade certified**” and “**FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certified,**” as well as “**post-consumer recycled**” and “**post-industrial recycled.**”

Climatecounts.org is a website that may also help you choose products with low environmental impact. This organization rates major companies on their efforts to address climate changes and offers a handy pocket guide you can print out and take with you shopping. It can help you choose among brands when you don’t know much about the earth-friendliness of a product you are buying.

As I headed toward the store exit I walked past a large wrapping paper display. The average American produces more than four pounds of solid waste per day. America also consumes about a third of the resources used in the world, despite having only 4.5% of the world’s population. Did I really need wrapping paper this year? The first way to minimize my environmental impact is to decide if I need to buy something at all. I had saved gift bags, boxes, and bows from the year before, so I chose to save my money. After all, a plain white box with a bow on it makes an elegant gift. Likewise, newspaper comics make for wrapping paper that’s sure to entertain.

I stopped at my local supermarket to pick up some groceries for Thanksgiving dinner. As I walked down the produce aisle, my eye focused on a “Pride of New York” label over a large display of apples. My grocery store, like many, now labels foods that are grown right here in New York. Choosing produce that is grown locally is an easy way to cut down on “food miles,” the distance food travels (usually in a large truck) to reach our tables. If local produce isn’t available, choosing food marked “organic” or that contains organic ingredients is the next best option. Organic growing methods bypass artificial fertilizers and pesticides, relying instead on natural ecological processes and healthy soils to produce food. Artificial fertilizers and pesticides are often made from fossil fuels, so organic agriculture can help conserve precious resources.

I picked up a bag of Pride of New York apples to make applesauce to go with the turkey. My kids had requested peach pie for Thanksgiving; since peaches were no longer in season, I picked out a package of frozen ones, checking for the “USDA certified organic” label on the package. The label ensures that the product meets federal standards.

On my way out of the store, I thanked the store manager for offering many new, eco-friendly products. Store managers need to know when the changes they made are appreciated by customers, and asking for earth-friendly options makes it more likely that you’ll be able to find such products.

Driving past the sparkling holiday displays, I went home feeling a little bit greener than I had before.

Meaghan Boice-Green enjoys the challenge of finding great green gifts in stores near her home in Medina. She is the Director at DEC’s Reinstein Woods Environmental Education Center in Depew.

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