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Reclaim your holidays to reduce stress, waste

By Mike Kilen

All the evidence you need about holiday stress on you and the planet is right down your neighborhood street. Cars are ripping through the neighborhood, the driver's frantically getting places, followed by a week of garbage bins teetering at the end of driveways, overflowing with waste.

"Our hope is the focus is more on meaning. When you do that, the busy-ness and buying will decrease and, we hope, benefit the environment," said Carole Yates, program manager at the University of Northern Iowa's Center for Energy & Environmental Education.

The center launched a campaign this year, Reclaim Your Holidays, that offers countless ideas to recapture that meaning, to simplify and, ultimately, to have a green Christmas.

In focus groups, they found that more Iowans than you think are making their own small attempts to rein in the madness, whether it's re-gifting or giving an experience gift or local food, making a gift or using compostable paper plates.

Often, the ideas can create less stressful holidays. "Maybe you try just one thing differently this year," Yates said. "It's not something you change overnight."

Susan Salterberg, who also has worked on the project in its first year, said the first step is communicating with the rest of the family or friends and then putting a plan together.

Don't just show up all self-righteous and announce that this holiday thing is nuts.

"People do know there is something wrong," Salterberg said. "So I talk about living your values. "The whole idea is comparing our standard of living with our quality of life. In America, we focus a lot on standard of living and not on quality of life."

The program's lasting benefit is its website, www.reclaimyourholidays.org that includes numerous pages of ways to simplify, de-stress and help the environment. A Facebook page is also set up and Iowans have begun to share what works for them.

Here's one: A respondent said her son has always mined the shelves of the Goodwill for gifts. They are often her favorite. She uses them for a while, then returns them to Goodwill. No energy to make new materials. No landfill waste. No big charge on the credit card. A happy mom. Everyone wins.

Holiday gift ideas

A few of the dozens of ideas at www.reclaimyourholidays.org:

Finances. Re-gift. Really, it's OK. Maybe someone on your list can use it and, if not, pass it on. Saves money and cuts the stress of shopping, too.

Meaning. Ask your family what's important. You may want to nix some time-consuming traditions and instead use that time to spend it with each other.

Food. The average piece of food travels 1,494 miles before you eat it. Go to a winter farmers market and buy local produce for your holiday dinner. Or give the gift of a CSA membership (Community Supported Agriculture) in your area (www.localharvest.org/csa/).

Soul. Give gifts with them, such as a charitable donation on behalf of the recipient or a planted tree in their name.

Decorations. Use natural decorations such as gourds, cranberries, pine cones, prairie plants and strings of popcorn. Save money and 1,494 hours of untangling Christmas lights.

Garbage. Google "compostable dinnerware." Save the argument over who washes the dishes, time for silly board games and the environment by marking a bin for tossing the compostables to keep separate from the landfill trash.