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Making the annual holiday office party green

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Holiday office parties are as much a part of the holiday season as caroling and baking. If done correctly, the parties can be a great outlet for stress relief and holiday cheer.

This year try “adding green” to your parties by offering an earth-friendly event. The Center for Energy and Environmental Education at the University of Northern Iowa is helping Iowans create more meaningful and greener holidays. Below are tips for making your annual office party a little greener:

- Invitations—create an electronic invitation to save paper. Many invites are available on the Internet, and include paperless RSVP options. A simple e-mail with the necessary details works as well.
- Good eats—hire caterers who use local foods, or request that they seek out even a few local foods for the get-together. Cooking and serving Iowa-grown foods is one sure way to toast colleagues. In addition, serving these foods contributes to your local economy, honoring the hard work of farmers and the richness of Iowa’s dark soils. For recipe ideas using local foods, visit the Northern Iowa Food & Farm Partnership website (<http://www.uni.edu/ceee/local-foods/recipes-and-food-preservation-techniques/recipesandfoodpreservation>). Be sure to bring containers in the event you have extra food, so it can be sent home with guests. Also, if you have caterers serve the foods to your guests, a federal “Good Samaritan” law allows donations to crisis centers and others in need.
- Decorations—items such as gourds, cranberries, pinecones and pine branches give a party a more natural feel, while eliminating potentially toxic decorations that ultimately end up in the trash. Consider using things already in the office such as office plants. String the plants with LED (light-emitting diode) lights -- they cost more up front, but according to the Environmental Defense Fund, the electricity savings can make up the cost difference within one or two years. Note: Artificial trees are usually made in China from polyvinyl chloride, which is one nasty plastic; carcinogens are emitted into the air when manufactured. Plus, the older an artificial tree is, the more likely the PVC will deteriorate and expose children and adults to enough lead to be what one research study published in the Journal of Environmental Health called a “noteworthy public health issue.”
- Gift-giving—Consider a gift-free zone during the holiday party. Take the pressure and extra financial strain out of gift-giving and suggest that the party itself is the gift. If your office wants to do a secret Santa or some gift exchange, consider giving consumables (nuts, jams, jellies, cider). Other possibilities include giving to a charitable cause or adopting a family. Other ideas include gifts of experience – eco-friendly outings, gifts to shows, personal

services or green items like soy candles and local wines. Another environmentally friendly idea is to write a check with everything filled in except the “pay to the order of.” Intentionally leave it blank, and allow the recipient to give the money to a charitable cause.

- After the party, take notes on how much food was consumed and what gift ideas worked, so you can be even more efficient and environmentally friendly when planning future parties.

For more ideas, tips and to share your own ideas for a green party, visit www.ReclaimYourHolidays.org.

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