When people are asked about their winter holiday celebrations, there’s an explosion of response. Below are ideas we’ve gathered from Iowans. We’d like to hear from you, too. (To learn how to contribute, see the bottom of this document.)

**What alternative gifts have you received that you loved?**

**Bale of straw?** Last year was my first winter holiday season with my fiancé’s parents. I knew they were keen on giving lots of gifts, so I asked my fiancé to talk to the family about simple gifts that were useful and meaningful. Though there were still a lot of gifts given, they took my request to heart--instead of the angel figurines and numerous outfits I wouldn’t wear anyway, I got a small radio for the kitchen and a few other useful items. My favorite gift, though, was from their farm—two bales of straw for mulching my garden. It got a good laugh from the rest of the family, but it will be one of my best-remembered and most appreciated holiday gifts ever!—*Iowa City woman*

**Mosquito control**—Last year, as a gift, my handy husband built a bat house for me! I can’t decide the best part: I appreciate that he remembered me talking about wanting natural mosquito control. I love that he and my kids had so much fun keeping a secret while he built it…or that it was a complete surprise to me!—*Swisher wife and mother*

**What alternative gifts work for kids?**

**Wolves, orcas and polar bears**—Since Christmas 2006, I began symbolically adopting an animal from the National Wildlife Federation or similar entity for each of my three children. I always make sure to get the stuffed animal along with a certificate. Where I purchase depends on what animal I am looking for. The animals I choose are always a surprise and the children look forward to finding out what animal they got. My children are older—now they are ages 16, 13 and 11. We have had wolves, manatees, orca, peregrine, and polar bears, to name a few. I am very excited to pick out this year’s gifts!—*Mt. Pleasant mother of three*

**Invest in grandkids’ futures**—After our daughter's first birthday and Christmas it became apparent she did not need any more toys. My father and step-mother asked and I agreed that, instead of buying her gifts, they would invest the money in a 529 college fund. After my son's birth, we did the same. Just recently, my husband and I asked them to give to the 529 college funds for our birthdays and Christmas as well.—*Cedar Rapids mother of two*

**Free lunch, free chicken**—I wanted to give my grandchildren and their parents a meaningful Christmas present that would sharpen their awareness of the value of giving to others. I am a member of my church's Free Lunch serving team in Iowa City and hit upon the idea of paying for a chicken dinner for the diners around Christmas time. A local grocery prepares and delivers the food, so it's very easy to arrange. My family receives a thank you letter from the Free Lunch
Program. They have discussed the gift, who gets it, and how much the diners appreciate it. It’s been a good solution for all concerned, and rewarding when I asked my granddaughter what she got for Christmas and the chicken dinner was the first gift she mentioned!—Iowa City grandmother

**What alternative gift ideas have worked for you?**

**Re-gifting**—It’s ok in my book to pass on a gift I’ve received to someone else if I don’t want it and the recipient needs it!—Swisher parent

**Number, color, adjective**—My son and his wife have done a fun gift exchange for each other for years. They pick a number, a color and an adjective. One year the theme was 3, blue and warm. She made a set of sweetheart mittens (1.a right hand, 2.a left hand and 3.a two handed one – for holding hands) out of blue fleece! Low cost, fun, personal, and no crowds!—Swisher mother of creative kids

**Silent auctions**—I attend several work related conferences each year in the fall. Every conference has a silent auction to raise funds. Many of the donated items are lovely and unique. I purchase my Christmas presents at these auctions, providing support for these organizations and interesting gifts for my family. Recently someone called this 'doubling down,' receiving twice the benefit for my dollar spent. That's all good. However, my favorite benefit is no last minute mall shopping without a clue what to purchase.—Cedar Rapids woman who is tired of last-minute mall shopping

**White elephants**—We have white elephant exchanges rather than purchasing new gifts for our extended families. All ages are included and everyone has a good time. Some gifts keep coming back each year and they are wanted by all. And some gifts keep coming back each year and everyone hopes they don’t get stuck with them. It has become a family tradition and gives the opportunity to share what you don’t want with others that might want it (or not!).—Dubuque mother with white elephants

**Frugality makes for unusual gifts and laughter**—Our son got us started on Goodwill gifting. We have teased him for years about his frugality, but his gifts are always unusual and provoke laughter and good stories, which is way better than getting stuff. Sometimes the items travel from year to year from person to person and are embellished. Sometimes the gifts are used over and over by the receiver and then “gifted” back to Goodwill when they are done with them.—Swisher mother with frugal son

**Charitable donations**—As the winter holidays approach, we think of all the "Holidays of Lights" traditions and celebrations that surround December. The greatest gift we received—and the light that continues to grow—is that of our adopted son from Calcutta, India, on December 14, 1988. We celebrate his roots, and our family traditions. We focus on others that light our world, and give gifts through donations to charitable organizations. We make an effort to give those donation gifts so that they reflect a special aspect of the personality of the person we are honoring.—Coralville mother giving light to the world

**What shopping or gift-giving ritual do you have?**
Breathe the winter air when shopping—I've never really enjoyed shopping, especially during the holiday season when the mall is packed with frenzied shoppers, moving like a herd of cattle through the mall corridors, with a buying mission that many times seems to override the real reasons for gift giving. I have found that shopping from local, privately owned shops feels better (like I'm supporting my community), and I don't waste as much time driving around to find a parking spot. My purchases also tend to be more unique from these smaller shops, rather than from the big chain stores. The feeling I get from shopping downtown is much more calm and joyous...I love going outside into the winter air between stores, smelling the aromas from the coffee shops and restaurants, and hearing folk and holiday music from minstrels sharing their musical gifts with the holiday shoppers.—Iowa City mother of three

What alternatives to wrapping paper work for you?

Dressing up gifts without the wrapper—I quit buying wrapping paper in the after-holiday sales and don’t miss having it stored in my closet for a year or seeing it stuffed in the trash afterwards! I also appreciate not fighting the crowds and using my money for something else. Now I re-use paper gift bags, comics, use cloth bags, kitchen towels, scarves or pretty shawls, or just a piece of ribbon or twine to “dress up” a gift.—Swisher mother who quit the wrapping paper program

Cloth gift bags look beautiful under the tree—About eight years ago, when my children were all in elementary school, I started sewing gift bags that could be used every year instead of wrapping paper. I buy colorful fabric on sale at the end of the holiday season each year and then sew a few more bags for my collection of various sizes and shapes. I make them very simple with a draw string at the top and a colorful ribbon or cord. Each year they look beautiful under our tree and they also have wonderful memories every year from the various gifts of previous years. My youngest son did request that I wrap one gift for him each year in wrapping paper, because he loves the sound and feeling of ripping open the paper!—Iowa City mother

What alternative celebrations have you tried?

Here’s to neutral territory at the holidays—Our extended family has gone to Backbone State Park to celebrate winter holidays three times. The cabins are modern and comfortable, we’ve had bonfires, we’ve hiked, and we’ve seen eagles fly eight feet above our heads. There’s no TV, so conversations, game-playing and being outside are the focus. Plus, it’s ‘neutral territory’ for cooking, so no one gets stuck with all of the cooking chores and it’s easy to justify having simple foods when at the cabin. —Iowa City woman celebrating with her mom, siblings, nieces and nephews

Ghirardelli’s for an ice cream breakfast—Having lived eight years and begun our family during graduate school in Chicago, the city beckoned during the holiday season as a return to family roots. Now, our tradition is to spend the three days before Christmas in that city. We have been surprised and touched by how much it means to our older children to continue the tradition. As they come from both coasts to spend Christmas "at home," the trip has evolved into their gift. We supply plane tickets, and spend three days and two nights in Chicago, culminating on Christmas Eve. Longer does NOT work. We go to certain restaurants (and they don't like to change them), including Giordano’s pizza, Greek Islands in Greek town, Ghirardelli’s for an ice cream breakfast, and a Chinese dinner on Christmas eve (see "A Christmas Story")… We complete the trip with the Christmas Vesper service at Rockefeller Chapel at the University of
Chicago… The service is over by 5:30, we immediately head for Iowa (in two cars now), stop at the DeKalb Oasis for fast food, and coordinate songs on the Christmas Carol radio stations, stopping only to sing "Old Man River" as we cross the Mississippi into Iowa.—An Iowa City couple with six children ranging from 10- to 30-years old

Want to share your idea?


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