

How to give gifts with the planet in mind

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Sandra Goldmark. Credit: Sandra Goldmark

The holidays can put the eco-conscious in a tricky spot. On one hand, the holidays are synonymous with the gift giving: What would Christmas be without Santa and his overstuffed sleigh? And other faiths, of course, share in different traditions around the theme of surprising and delighting the people we love. But considering the enormous amount of

waste flowing into landfills, not to mention the tremendous strain on natural resources—and the pocketbook—how can one give in a responsible way?

Sandra Goldmark has a few ideas. Goldmark is the senior assistant dean of interdisciplinary engagement at the Columbia Climate School and director of campus sustainability and [climate action](#) at Barnard College. She is also the founder of [Fixup](#) and author of "Fixation: How to Have Stuff Without Breaking the Planet."

"Thinking a bit more sustainably can actually save you money," she says. "It's good for the planet and it's a wonderful way to show you care." Below, Goldmark shares tips for how to avoid buying new; how to source great used items online; and why giving less tangible things like experiences or acts of service are often more valued than a quick Amazon shop.

What is circularity and how does it apply to gift giving?

[Circularity](#) is actually really simple. It's about buying things that last, repairing and reusing things instead of throwing them out, and passing them on when done with them.

This is something we can do every day, including the [holidays](#). The good news is that re-gifting is sustainable. Passing something on to someone who might like it more is both thoughtful and sustainable.

Even children can give sustainable gifts such as redeemable coupons for [household chores](#) or favors, or homemade upcycled presents.

Why should we do this?

We know we are facing a lot of environmental challenges. Sustainable gifts are a small way we can all make a difference. More than 90% of the materials we take from the earth to make stuff go into landfill or incinerator—too often within just one year.

Can you give some examples of circularity when it comes to holiday gift giving?

Give local experiences over objects. For example, I'm giving my kids circus tickets this year. Or give gently used goods: There are a million wonderful ways to give fabulous used stuff, from flea markets to vintage shops to tons of websites with previously owned items. Refurbished electronics are easy to find and can come with warranties. Sometimes even just giving something that you already have that has meaning is a lovely [gift](#).

You can also give acts of service. Helping someone with yard work, a repair, helping parents with free babysitting services—these gifts are often more precious than gold. You can also give food, better yet food that's sustainably sourced, like wine, plants, chocolate, and so on—things that people can actually use or eat.

If you do give new, give thoughtfully: make sure it is sustainably sourced, well made, repairable, and of course, something your loved one actually needs or wants. Something well-made and durable that can be repaired and will last a long time.

Additional facts and stats:

- An [estimated \\$8.3 billion](#) is spent each year on unwanted gifts, which inevitably end up in the trash or attics and garages. We can save money and reduce waste by gifting more sustainably

- The U.S. creates [5.8 million tons](#) more waste in December than in other months of the year.
- The resale market [continues to grow](#) and in 2023, more Americans than ever are choosing to buy and sell secondhand. Reuse/resale resale has grown 21 times faster than traditional retail.

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