



# Russian River Watershed Association

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## RRWA Environmental Column – November 2013 Environmentally-Friendly Holiday Season

As the holiday season begins, so does the accompanying celebrating, and buying, and wrapping. Did you know that an extra million tons of waste is generated nationwide each week between Thanksgiving and New Year's? Fortunately, there is a lot you can do to reduce the amount of waste during and after the holiday season.

Headed out to the shopping mall or grocery store for some holiday shopping? Over the holidays, thousands of paper and plastic shopping bags end up in landfills. Instead of accepting a new bag at each store, take along reusable shopping bags to help reduce the number of single-use, disposable bags distributed by retailers. Tell store clerks you don't need a bag for small or oversized purchases. Reusable shopping bags are available for purchase at many grocery stores and other retail locations.

When buying gifts, check product labels to determine an item's recyclability and whether the product and the packaging are made from recycled materials. Send recycled-content greeting cards to reduce the amount of virgin paper used during the holidays. If you use traditional gift wrapping, avoid wrapping gifts in materials that are not recyclable or reusable, such as foil or metallic papers. Buy recycled-content wrapping paper - this purchasing choice encourages manufacturers to make more recycled-content products available. Be sure to recycle packaging, wrapping paper, cards, holiday-themed catalogs and advertisements, and anything else that is recyclable. Cancel catalogs you don't need. Food waste, household hazardous waste (such as batteries), and electronics should be properly disposed of as well.

Unless specifically noted in the following sections, please visit the resources at the end of the article for recycling and disposal options for the listed items as well as many others. Thanks to Sonoma and Mendocino Counties, there are many opportunities available to properly and easily dispose of your waste.

**Composting:** You can compost your food scraps from your holiday dinners and parties. Fruits, vegetables, peels and seeds can be composted at home. In fact, about 35 percent of residential garbage is food waste, a resource that could be used instead of sent to the landfill. In Sonoma County, fruit and veggie food scraps can be put in the curbside yard debris cart for the municipal composting program (<http://www.recyclenow.org/compost/curbside.asp>).

**Cooking oil:** Recycle the cooking oil if you deep fry a turkey. There are locations in both Sonoma County and Mendocino County that accept clean strained cooking oil to be made into biodiesel.

**Wrapping paper and ribbon:** Paper makes up about 19 percent of what's going into our home-generated garbage. Holiday paper, cards, envelopes, and cardboard packaging can be recycled, along with other year-round paper items, such as catalogs and magazines, in your single-stream curbside recycling cart. Foil-backed, metallic, and plastic wrapping paper cannot be recycled. Save ribbon to reuse on next year's packages.

**Packaging:** If you accumulate packing peanuts and bubble wrap over the holidays, many local packaging stores and mail centers are glad to accept these items for reuse.

**Christmas trees:** Christmas trees can be recycled into compost and mulch! Think twice before purchasing a "flocked" tree - sprayed-on artificial snow can be made from environmentally harmful components and hinder the ability to recycle a Christmas tree. Before recycling, your tree must be free of flocking, tinsel, decorations and its stand. For pickup and drop-off options after the holidays, in Sonoma County visit <http://www.recyclenow.org/recycling/tree.asp>.



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**Electronics:** There are many options for the proper disposal of both working and non-working electronics. Under a state mandate, electronics cannot be put in the garbage. An electronic device is anything with a circuit board. Look for devices with digital displays or programmable features. Examples include computers, TVs, laptops, printers, answering machines, CD and DVD players, stereos and cell phones.

Many of the stores where you buy your new electronics will take your old ones back from you and get them to a responsible recycler, even if the old item wasn't purchased there. When you're shopping for that TV or computer, ask the sales staff if they will take back your old electronics. If your item is working and can be reused, consider donation. Many local charities operate thrift stores and are always looking for donated items. Many of these organizations also accept both working and non-working electronics. In some areas, small electronic devices can be disposed of in the curbside recycling.

You can also recycle your old cell phones. State law requires that retailers selling cell phones take back used cell phones at time of purchase. For a complete list of services for your area, in Sonoma County visit <http://www.recyclenow.org/toxics/electronics.asp>.

**Batteries:** About 40 percent of all battery sales occur during the holiday season. Batteries should not be placed in the trash. Buy rechargeable batteries to accompany your electronic gifts, and consider giving a battery charger as well. Rechargeable batteries reduce the amount of potentially harmful materials thrown away, and can save money in the long run. By law, retailers selling rechargeable batteries are required to take back used rechargeable batteries from their customers. For a list of these retailers, visit the Call2Recycle website at <http://www.call2recycle.org/>.

Some stores offer take-back for alkaline batteries, in addition to rechargeables. All kinds of household batteries can also be disposed of through Sonoma County's Household Toxics Program and the Mendocino County HazMobile Program.

**Holiday Lights:** Brighten your holidays while saving money with LED lights. LED's use 75% less energy than conventional holiday lights and last up to 25 times longer than incandescent lighting. They also offer convenient features like dimming and automatic shut-off.

Want to know more about recycling? For any questions about recycling and year-round disposal options:

In Sonoma County, visit [www.recyclenow.org](http://www.recyclenow.org), call the Sonoma County Eco-Desk at 565-DESK (3375), or look for your Sonoma County Recycling Guide printed in the Yellow Pages (formerly AT&T) under Recycling.

In Mendocino County, call the Recycling Hotline at 468-9704, visit [www.mendorecycle.org](http://www.mendorecycle.org) or see the Mendocino County Recycling Guide available through your waste hauler or from most cities.

*This article was authored by Lisa Steinman, Waste Management Specialist for the Sonoma County Waste Management Agency, on behalf of RRWA. RRWA ([www.rrwatershed.org](http://www.rrwatershed.org)) is an association of local public agencies in the Russian River Watershed that have come together to coordinate regional programs for clean water, fisheries restoration, and watershed enhancement.*