

Making Ripples Wildlife Christmas Trees

by Amanda Bancroft

There's a debate about which type of tree – artificial or real – has the least amount of environmental impact. Wikipedia states that a real tree generates 3.1 kg of greenhouse gases every year, while an artificial tree produces 48.3 kg over its lifetime, but these numbers are affected by how long you keep your artificial tree and how far you drive to purchase a real one.

Most US artificial trees are shipped from China, while real trees are purchased locally to maintain freshness. Christmas tree farms create habitat for wildlife, but often use chemicals and pesticides to maintain their trees. Artificial trees contain non-sustainable materials, and their needles shed lead-laced dust onto the presents below, affecting the brain, liver, kidneys and reproductive systems of small children, according to the Children's Health Environmental Coalition.

Recently, I learned that many Christmas ornaments sold in the US were produced by – ironically – enslaved children who had been stolen from their homes to work long hours without access to sunlight. But that doesn't mean all ornaments are made that way. You can buy fair trade, make a homemade ornament as a gift, or just make them edible.

Yes, edible! This is what we've chosen to do this year, as we forge a new path and create traditions that don't come with a guilt tag. On Christmas Eve, we'll be decorating a tree outdoors, as a present for deer, birds, squirrels and all the other wildlife searching for food this winter. Last month, an opossum climbed up a hoe leaning against the side of our house, to peek in the window while trying to grab the peanut butter pinecone we'd hung outside as a test ornament!

To make these irresistible pinecone ornaments, find some pinecones, spread peanut butter around the outside, and roll them in a variety of seeds. Using twine or other natural material that can easily decompose, tie a hook onto each pinecone and hang them from your outdoor tree. You can string popcorn and cranberries using thin twine instead of thread or fishing line, so that birds don't become entangled. Squirrels will love corn cob ornaments, and you can even hang up whole dried sunflower heads. I can't wait to use our cookie cutters to make ornaments from millet bread, spread peanut butter on them, and decorate with raisins and sunflower seeds! Using fruit will be colorful, too. Try orange, lemon, apple and lime slices, or a string of grapes.

If you have a more mainstream tree this year, one that needs to be taken outside after the holidays – why not recycle it for wildlife? Bring it out to your yard or woods and re-decorate it with edible presents for your favorite winter songbirds. Afterwards, it can become mulch for next spring's garden!

Ripples is a blog connecting people to resources on sustainable living while chronicling their off-grid journey and supporting the work of non-profit organizations. Read more on this topic and others at www.RipplesBlog.org