



Focus on Food

CELEBRATING THE HOLIDAYS: Sustainable Entertaining

by Maria Noël Groves, Clinical Herbalist & Co-op Wellness Educator

December marks my and my husband's birthdays, Christmas with the four families (yes, four), New Year's, and a few holiday house parties in between... offering me plenty of opportunity to practice my party skills. I have one basic rule: keep it easy, delicious, fun, affordable, and green. Here are a few tricks we have learned along the way:

Celebrate What's Local, Fresh & Healthy:

Let seasonal produce inspire you, and stick with simple yet beautiful and tasty dishes that won't break the bank. I decorate with and cook up winter squash from local farmers. Turn the squash in to simple sides: Baked red kuri squash will blow your mind topped with maple syrup and butter. Chunks of delicata can be baked and eaten with the skins on. Stuff and bake acorn squash with sausage or veggies. And I learned from the Co-op's Pastry Chefs that blue hubbard makes the best "pumpkin" pie. Play with cranberries in sauces, desserts, and cocktails. A medley of roasted root vegetables tossed with olive oil and fresh rosemary makes an easy crowd pleaser. Of course there's mulled cider and the many apple desserts. (I love pie, but crisp is far easier and just as tasty.) Rub raw lacinato and/or red Russian kale with olive oil and a little bit of Bragg Liquid Aminos for a surprisingly tasty, vibrantly green side dish. Local turkey, ham, or wild game easily serves as a centerpiece for larger, traditional get-togethers. Vegetarians (and carnivores) will enjoy gorgeous meatless main dishes like stuffed squash, vegetable tarts, and hearty stews... which will also save you a bundle in grocery costs.

I'm not a militant localvore, though. I include organic grapes alongside local cheese and crackers. My biggest party pleaser is a bejeweled red fruit salad of layered grapes, strawberries, raspberries, and pomegranate seeds. And never underestimate the appeal of a bowl of satsumas (the best!) or clementines for a crowd stuffed to the gills. When buying exotic ingredients, choose fair trade and organic.

For more ideas, flip through cookbooks and search websites for high-rated recipes with minimal ingredients and prep time. Don't drive yourself insane: Stick to just a couple dishes, and make the party a potluck. Go light on dessert – there always seems to be too much, and everyone is too full to eat it!

Save Money: I watch every penny. Stocking up on seasonal ingredients almost always saves money, as does sticking with as many produce-based and meatless dishes as possible. I watch the sales for the packaged items I rely on.

Crackers, olive oil, sugar, flour, butter, eggnog, and other holiday staples tend to go on sale this time of year; I don't pay full price if I can help it. Watch for the Co-op's mid-month sale change and coupons on the shelves.

Reduce Waste: We host parties with more than 50 people that end up with just one small bag of trash. How? I pull out hand-me-down plates, mugs, and utensils. I've accumulated a variety of affordable, washer-safe wineglasses, tablecloths, and cloth napkins. I have about 40 four-ounce stackable glasses that are perfect for wine, cocktail shots, fruit salad, and small servings of soup. The dishwasher and washing machine take care of the clean-up. I hide a small stash of paper plates, napkins, and cups in the back for the few hold-outs who refuse to use the real thing, or in case I run out. (I haven't had to buy new packages in four years.) My mother and I share linens since she hosts Thanksgiving, and I host Christmas. We opt for neutral festive colors like navy, plum, green, and crimson. Whatever you don't have, borrow!

Keep well-marked recycling containers and compost buckets next to your trash cans. When sending invitations, save money, paper, and headache by handling it all via email. E-vites are particularly lovely and can even track what dishes your guests will bring.

Green Decor: Besides the colorful squash, citrus, and tablecloths already mentioned, we decorate much of the house with local greenery. Shortly after Thanksgiving, we invite our friends and family to join us for a tree-cutting at a local tree farm. (Visit pickyourownchristmastree.org/NHxmastrees.php to find one near you.) We all collect evergreens, pine cones, berries, dried plants, and whatever else strikes our fancy from our backyards. After the tree-cutting, we convene at our home to create gorgeous wreaths and swags that last into January and can then be thrown in the compost pile. We spend almost nothing, have a grand time, and create lovely decor that makes me smile each day. A handful of bows, ornaments, and other decorations get reused year after year.

Green Gifts: While Shannon and I enjoy the gift-giving aspects of the holidays, we work hard to keep it from ruling our lives and bank accounts. We just buy a few small gifts for our immediate families from local shops (or give a donation to a charity in their name) and make cookies or lip balms for the extended fam. We stick to useful and sentimental gifts like gear to play outdoors together and photo albums of the past year. For our birthdays and all other holidays, we skip the presents and set aside time to have an adventure together – be it cooking a nice dinner and dancing in our home, going out, or catching a x-c ski nearby with hot cocoa in hand.

Are my holidays crazy? Yes. But, I don't let that stop me from having fun. Crank up the tunes, and enjoy! ■

Visit www.wintergreenbotanicals.com for seasonal recipes.