



# THE NEXT STEP Toward a Healthier Future

A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE SEBASTOPOL TOXICS EDUCATION PROGRAM

## Healthy Homes For the Holidays

As we gather with family and friends to celebrate our winter holidays of choice, how can we create a healthier, less-toxic home and environment for everyone? Here are some ideas:

■ **Avoid using "spray snow."** Often used on trees, wreaths, and windowpanes to create that "wintery" look, spray snow contains toxic chemicals that are dangerous when inhaled or absorbed through the skin – like perchloroethylene ("perc") and acetone. Create homemade paper snow-flake cutouts instead!

■ **Keep pets safe.** If you have a pet, avoid adding products to your Christmas tree water to extend tree life. Pets often drink this water and can be harmed.

■ **Clean less-toxically.** Many cleaners have hidden toxics – and you can make your home sparkle without them! Read your product labels carefully and look at the store for less-toxic alternatives. And stay tuned to future issues for more about less-toxic cleaners!

■ **Buy local organic food.** Support local less-toxic agriculture by buying local organic food for guests and as gifts. Nurture your friends and family, and share with them the joy of our wonderful local organic bounty.



■ **Bake with healthier, less-toxic dyes.** Instead of using synthetic food dyes, try natural ones instead!

■ **Dispose of wrapping paper properly.** Don't burn it in your fireplace; it can create flash fires and contain metals that are toxic when burned. Reuse or recycle instead. Avoid buying paper with metallic surfaces because it can't be recycled.

■ **Give "home healthy" gifts.** Help your loved ones reduce their toxic exposure and create a healthier home. A nice gift is The Green Kitchen Handbook, by Annie Berthold-Bond, which gives an action-oriented overview of many household issues and options.

For more tips on creating ecological holidays (including reducing the enormous amount of waste Americans create each holiday season) see <[www.healthyworld.org/eco\\_holidays.html](http://www.healthyworld.org/eco_holidays.html)>.

~ Patricia Dines

## Don't Eat These Plants!

Many beautiful plants are part of our shared holiday traditions. However, be aware that some can make kids and pets sick if eaten. Keep plants like these out of their curious reach: **Boxwood**; **Christmas rose** (Helleborus); **English ivy**; **Holly berries**; **Mistletoe**; **Poinsettia**; and **Toyon** (Calif. holly).

If your kids gather mistletoe, let them know that it's poisonous to eat, and have them wash their hands after handling it.

Source: UC Master Gardeners, 565-2608.

~ Rebecca Dwan

## Batteries: A Hidden Toxic



It seems like every time I go for a walk around town, I see batteries lying in a parking lot or gutter, oozing their battery acid and toxics into our environment and water supply.

I try to keep a double plastic bag with me to pick them up, but often I forget. Every year I try to do a bit more for our planet, and this year my pledge includes picking up these batteries and telling folks about them. And batteries do tend to proliferate during the holidays!

■ **Dispose of batteries properly.** Alkaline (flashlight) batteries made after 1993 can go in the garbage (not the gutter!). But other batteries contain toxics so save them for a Household Toxics Roundup Day. This includes re-chargeable Ni-Cads (for phones, etc.) and "button" batteries (for watches, cameras, etc.) For Roundup dates, see <[www.recyclenow.org](http://www.recyclenow.org)> or call 527-3375.

■ **Educate children about batteries.** Kids often use lots of batteries so you can help them minimize their use and dispose of them properly. And you can encourage them to help pick up those on the ground. After all, kids are lower to the ground and notice more! Show them how to carefully pick up and store batteries (use a double plastic bag as a glove) and encourage them to tell their friends.

■ **Switch to rechargeable batteries.** You can help reduce the toxics all around by buying a smart recharger from a place like Real Goods. These can charge many battery types and sizes (not only those sold as rechargeables) and will tell you when batteries are used up. Solar rechargers are also available. Again, recharging batteries makes a great educational household chore for kids.

There are some downsides to rechargeable batteries. They cost more initially and don't always last as long per use as the throwaways. Users of rechargeable battery flashlights tend to keep a couple of

See Batteries, over

## Composting: Creating Rich Garden Gold

With leaves falling and spent garden plants piling up, fall is a good time to start your compost pile. That is, if you want to save money, reduce waste sent to local landfills, and create healthy vibrant gardens and landscaping nontoxically! Plus it's a great way to involve your family in the natural cycle of decomposition and topsoil building – which we can speed up by “cooking” the necessary ingredients in our own backyard.

With composting, you can create dense, humus-rich soil from kitchen scraps (no dairy or meat), dried leaves, weeds, old plants, newspapers, cotton fabric, bits of cardboard – basically anything biodegradable. Instead of filling our landfills,

these wastes become rich soil that nurtures your garden naturally – and saves you money on fertilizer!

There are two basic methods for making compost.

■ **Warm composting** is the method I prefer because it's less labor-intensive. You simply pile the proper balance of nitrogen-based and carbon-based organic materials in a pile, then forget about it for about 6-8 months, when you harvest your rich garden gold.

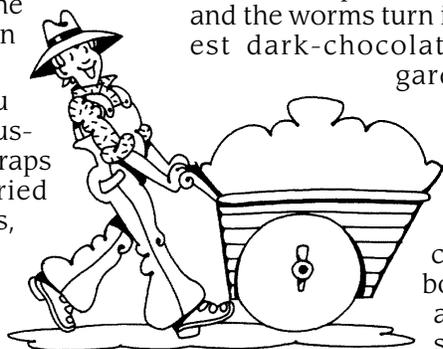
■ My wife prefers **hot composting**, where you actively turn the piles with a pitchfork heating the pile up and breaking the materials down faster. With hot composting, you can make a garden-ready pile in 4-12 weeks.

We decided to do warm composting and amp it up with **vermiculture – composting with worms!**

In this amazing process, worms eat both soil and organic materials, and, with the help of bacteria in their intestines, pass it out in a combined form as worm castings – an extremely rich soil amendment.

According to Mary Applehof, co-author of *Worms Eat Our Garbage*, in one year all the worms on a square acre create 51 tons of worm castings. She says that the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides has not only reduced soil earthworm and microbial populations, but also the amount of natural organic matter in the soil.

I have a 4 by 4 wooden box in my backyard. I started (inoculated) the box with just a handful of red worms. I add organic material – weeds, kitchen scraps, straw, burlap sacks – and the worms turn it into the greatest dark-chocolate gold of the garden. I started this bin 8 months ago, and now have a 6-inch layer of pure worm castings on the bottom of the bin and a box full of squirming worms.



All for the price of keeping it moist, adding organic material for food (not so much that they never get through it, and enough so they don't run out), and a little patience.

Now, when I put in my fall and winter gardens, I save money and simply spread a half-inch of worm castings (with a few worms included) then plant my lettuce, greens, peas, and root-crops. And I add a handful of castings whenever I transplant an established plant, which gives great nutrients to the land and the plants, and ultimately, to the self.

**To find out more** about the art of composting and how to create a resource out of perceived wastes, contact the Master Gardener Information Desk at 527-2608; look for books at our local library and bookstores; or do a search online.

And **teachers and parents can help make vermiculture part of the classroom.** Contact the Master Gardeners' Barbara Brown at 829-3487 to arrange a presentation and get resources to make worm-composting a success!

~ Craig Litwin

### Come Plant With Us!

Join Planting Earth Activation and STEP for more days of volunteering to help with the city's landscaping.

**Fri., Nov. 2nd**, 12-5pm, Covert Lane (rescheduled from Oct.)

**Fri., Dec. 1st**, 12-5pm, Downtown, just west of the movie theatre.

And check out our new organic plantings at the Police Department and across the street!

### Batteries, continued

flashlights around, just in case the batteries lose charge. But, with their repeated uses, rechargeables save you money in the long run – and are better for our health and the planet!

When rechargeable batteries finally do wear out, you have another disposal option. These stores will accept Ni-Cad batteries only: ACE Hardware; Cellular One; Circuit City; Radio Shack; Target; and Wal-Mart.

■ **Give smart gifts.** Be earth-friendly and avoid buying gifts that need batteries. And consider giving that battery-loving child or friend a recharger and rechargeable batteries.

And please help pass on to others the scoop about batteries. Thanks!

Sources: *Press Democrat*; *Sonoma County Waste Management*

~ Rebecca Dwan

## ABOUT STEP

**The Next Step** is published six times a year for Sebastopol residents by the **Sebastopol Toxics Education Program (STEP)**.

**STEP's mission** is to support Sebastopol citizens in reducing their toxic use and exposure, creating a healthier and safer Sebastopol for everyone.

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**You can help make STEP possible!** Write an article, share your success story, or be a liaison to businesses or schools. Together we can support our community's conversion to less-toxic alternatives! To find out more, call 829-2999.