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LIFE & STYLE | DECEMBER 18, 2008

# How Green Is Your Gift List? We Find Out

A Trio of Experts Tests Items Touted as 'Eco-Friendly'; The \$19,700 Copper Bathtub

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By GWENDOLYN BOUNDS

Are recycled-glass champagne flutes "green" if their carbon footprint stretches to Spain? What about compostable dishes you can toss in the backyard after dinner -- but then must replenish?



Recycled-glass champagne flutes from Spain

While the economy struggles, commercialization of the eco-movement is in full force. There was "Green Tuesday," a trumped-up shopping day by eco-retailers to rival Black Friday and Cyber Monday. Amazon has created an entire "Amazon Green" department complete with a list of popular green gifts -- and of course links to buy them. Sears now has an Energy Star store on its Web site while Macys.com touts its "New Leaf" environmental initiative complete with "eco-shop." Even pets are a target market: L.L. Bean is hawking pet placemats made from recycled plastic bottles, while entirelypets.com hosts a new "Green Dog Organics" section (think Wild Alaskan Salmon treats).

The merchandising hopes aren't without basis: Nearly a quarter of online shoppers plan to buy gift cards or green gifts this holiday season, according to PayPal. And almost half of consumers said they'd be willing to pay extra for eco-wares,

according to Deloitte LLP's annual holiday survey.

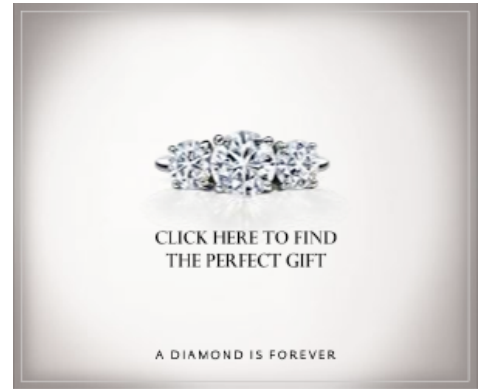
But in pushing consumers to shell out bucks for new green goods, retailers and manufacturers walk a fine marketing line: Just how "eco-friendly" is buying more stuff?

"It's a tough one because America's religion is consumerism -- that's the way the world works and the economy is run," says Sarah Beatty, founder of Green Depot, a purveyor of green building materials and home goods. "That being said, the greenest thing to do is to minimize what goes to the landfill."

Making matters trickier, consumers often must sort through marketing hype to determine how well their dollars are being spent. "Organic" is still a loosely regulated term in many industries; gasoline is organic, as are many chemicals with carbon. There is a growing body of third-party certifiers and labels -- such as Green Seal, Greenguard, Energy Star and Scientific Certification Systems -- but they currently cover a small fraction of products.



To help sort through the noise, we enlisted a trio of eco-experts to assess some potential gifts being touted to shoppers and the media as green -- from \$44 organic towels to a \$19,700 recycled copper bathtub. We asked



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Recycled copper tub by Native Trails

the panel to weigh items on several fronts -- including sustainability, energy efficiency, resource conservation and health -- based on the marketing information given to consumers. They then rated each item on an eco-scale of 1 (least green) to 10 (greenest). We also tested several products

for efficacy ourselves.

Note: participation in the panel doesn't signal endorsement of any product. Panelists included staffers from the not-for-profit Green Seal environmental certification group ([greenseal.org](http://greenseal.org)); the not-for-profit Rocky Mountain Institute ([rmi.org](http://rmi.org)), which focuses on energy conservation and sustainability; and David Johnston, founder of Boulder-based green building consultancy What's Working Inc. ([whatsworking.com](http://whatsworking.com)).

### Compostable Dinnerware by VerTerra

**Price/retailer:** \$9.99 (10 square dinner plates), \$8.99 (10 round bowls), [www.verterra.com](http://www.verterra.com)

**Description:** Disposable dinnerware constructed from fallen palm leaves that will "naturally biodegrade" in 60 days; several eco-bloggers suggested tossing used dishes in the backyard for compost. No plastics, waxes, chemicals or bleach used. Microwave-, oven- and refrigerator-safe.

**Comment:** Dishes were sturdier than usual paper or Styrofoam fare, though smelled faintly like trees and had some unsightly brown markings. Our panel was divided: Two said such compostable dinnerware is a must for one-time use. Per bloggers suggestions, the third expert had reservations that "anything can biodegrade" in your backyard without certain conditions and temperatures, noting that "my guess is that in 60 days, you'd still have a yard full of dishes."

**Eco-rank:** 5

### PowerFilm Rollable Solar Charger (5 Watt)

**Price/retailer:** \$109.95, [www.sundancesolar.com](http://www.sundancesolar.com)

**Description:** Portable solar power for iPods, cellphones, GPS units. A small, waterproof 1-foot-by-2-foot solar mat uses free sunshine power to charge any wireless device through its own 12V cigarette lighter adapter. Can also provide trickle-charge to 12V batteries in boats, cars or tractors, to keep them from dying when not in use.

**Comment:** "Cool idea" according to one expert; "solar anything is great," says another. "Convenient where electricity is scarce," reports the third. One hitch: You need sun. On a rainy winter day, the only way we got juice was shining a 100-watt incandescent bulb over the mat. Not so eco. The next day, though, our GPS charged in a couple of hours with unit sitting near sunny window. Extra plus to retailer for packing unit in biodegradable vegetable-starch peanuts.

**Eco-rank:** 8



Sony's organic TVs

### Sony Organic LED HDTV

**Price/retailer:** \$2499.99, [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

**Description:** Light-emitting OLED doesn't require a backlight and can achieve high level of energy efficiency. When elements are in "off" state, they consume no power, which not all TVs do. Energy Star-qualified. 11-inch flat-panel screen; one-year parts and labor warranty.

**Comment:** One excited male panelist gave it a "perfect 10," noting that "boys must have their toys, and I really like this one." Another

liked the lower energy usage, but wondered if electronics should really be deemed "organic" just because materials include carbon.

**Eco-rank:** 6

### Waterhog Personalized Pet Place Mat

**Price/retailer:** \$32.95, [www.llbean.com](http://www.llbean.com)

**Description:** Mat for animal's water and food bowls. Constructed with 30 oz. polyester fabric made from recycled plastic bottles. Durable rubber backing contains recycled material.

**Comment:** Good use for recycled plastic, our panel said, though one member said, "I guess there is a market for anything." They recommended asking whether maker uses an adhesive without a lot of VOCs (volatile organic compounds). (L.L.Bean customer service says no

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adhesive is used.)

**Eco-rank:** 5

### *Ecofan by Caframo*

**Price/retailer:** \$95, [www.leevalley.com](http://www.leevalley.com)

**Description:** Small fan sits on top of wood stove and circulates heat. Doesn't plug in or use batteries but rather generates own electricity by exploiting difference in temperatures between stovetop and ambient air.

**Comment:** All our experts found this to be a great idea to circulate warm air. Compared with the deafening, electricity-sucking blowers on our old wood stove, this silent fan coupled with a new energy-efficient wood unit was a welcome (and free) way to keep warm. Bonus: It came packed in recycled paper with suggestions (printed in vegetable ink) for new uses for the wrapping: compost for gardening, cleaning windows, weed-blocking.

**Eco-rank:** 7



Design Within Reach

The Herman Miller LED Leaf Light is \$499 at Design Within Reach.

### *Herman Miller LED Leaf Light*

**Price/retailer:** \$499, [www.dwr.com](http://www.dwr.com)

**Description:** LED task light delivers light spectrum from white to warm, is dimmable and remembers your last user setting. Promoted as an "our pick" on retailer Design Within Reach's home page encouraging shoppers to turn over a "Green Leaf." Uses Herman Miller's Design for the Environment protocol, emphasizing sustainability and recyclable materials. Says LEDs use 40% less energy than compact fluorescent lights, and carry a lifespan up to 100,000 hours.

**Comment:** Two high "9" ratings from our panelists (if you have the cash), who say LEDs are the lighting of the future. A third wanted to know the expected lifespan of product and whether you can recycle it. (It comes with a five-year conditional warranty and is 95% recyclable, according to DWR.)

**Eco-rank:** 7

### *Wind Power Renewable Energy Science Kit by Thames & Kosmos*

**Price/retailer:** \$49.95, [www.imaginechildhood.com](http://www.imaginechildhood.com)

**Description:** Children's kit teaches about wind power; includes materials to build a working wind turbine and generate electricity to light an LED. For ages 8 and over.

**Comment:** Our critics were big fans of the wind kit as a renewable energy teaching tool. "May millions of kids get these for Christmas and grow up to be wind engineers," said one. One worry, as with all children's toys: How safe are components (i.e. lead-based paint)? According to [imaginechildhood.com](http://imaginechildhood.com), the manufacturer says that it complies with all current safety standards including new standards due to take effect in February of 2009.

**Eco-rank:** 8



Sergio Capursi/The Wall Street Journal

Left to right: The Amazing Water Clock is \$12.99 at [thinkgeek.com](http://thinkgeek.com); Compostable Dinnerware is \$8.99 and \$9.99 at [verterra.com](http://verterra.com); PowerFilm Solar Charger is \$109.95 at [sundancesolar.com](http://sundancesolar.com) and Ecofan is \$95 at [leevalley.com](http://leevalley.com).

## *ZeroWater Filter Pitcher*

**Price/retailer:** \$39.99, [www.zerowater.com](http://www.zerowater.com)

**Description:** Home water-filter system uses a five-stage filtration cartridge designed to remove more contaminants from tap water than conventional carbon filters. Comes with a TDS meter (Total Dissolved Solids) that instantly calculates water's purity. Filters are "recyclable" through the company (but consumer pays shipping).

**Comment:** It took several rounds of filtering to get a "zero" ppm (parts per million) reading, but that's a big difference from the 200 ppm coming out of the tap. (Company says filter chambers sometimes need time to settle.) Our panel roundly approved of the concept, noting the waste of petroleum and energy for plastic-bottled water as well as tainted-water supplies in some communities. However, one rater cautioned against buying a new filter system if old one is still working well -- and wondered how many consumers would bother sending back old filters.

**Eco-rank:** 6

## *Bit Dr. by LoggerHead Tools*

**Price/retailer:** \$24.95, [www.loggerheadtools.com](http://www.loggerheadtools.com)

**Description:** Made-in-the-USA multi-tool that combines 21 full-size screw drivers into a single 4" x 1 1/2" x 5/8th" size -- reducing need for multiple units. Lifetime warranty and nickel-coated for corrosion resistance. Maker says producing products in the U.S. using environmentally responsible manufacturing adds to a "green-sustainable" economy.

**Comment:** Panelists agreed longer-lasting products using fewer parts cut landfill waste. They also gave a nod to energy savings of U.S. manufacturing. But two called it a "stretch" on the green front, noting that many homeowners have a good working set of tools. We liked the lightweight, ergonomic feel.

**Eco-rank:** 3



Apple MacBook

## *Apple MacBook*

**Price/retailer:** \$1,299 (13-inch aluminum), [www.apple.com](http://www.apple.com)

**Description:** Apple is promoting its new MacBook series as "The world's greenest family of notebooks" with arsenic-free glass, mercury-free LED-backlit display, brominated-flame-retardant-free internal components, PVC-free internal cables, highly recyclable aluminum and glass enclosure, and up to 41% smaller packaging.

**Comment:** Applause from panel for quantifying "green" claims and reducing toxic interior materials -- though they were unclear how the "recycling" advertised by Apple would work. Apple says consumers purchasing a qualifying Apple computer or display receive free recycling of old computer and monitor, regardless of manufacturer. (Apple sends you a prepaid box to your house so you can mail it to the company.) Additionally, Apple says no waste from its U.S. recycling program is shipped outside of North America.

**Eco-rank:** 7

## *Black & Decker Cordless Electric Mulching Lawn Mower*

**Price/retailer:** \$434.99, [www.doitbest.com](http://www.doitbest.com)

**Description:** Cordless 24-V, Energy Star-rated battery charger, zero-emissions mower. Mow up to 1/3-acre lot on a single charge.

**Comment:** Everyone liked the no-gas, no-emissions approach -- though noted it wasn't realistic for larger lawns. A couple questioned the need for grass at all, instead touting xeriscaping, which makes use of native plants that require less water, or vegetables you can eat. The panel also said consumers should ask if company will recycle batteries when they need replacing. Black & Decker says yes, consumers should take battery to one of the company's service centers for recycling.

**Eco-rank:** 6

## *Garmin GPS Nuvi 880*

**Price/retailer:** \$799.99, [www.garmin.com](http://www.garmin.com)

**Description:** Next-generation GPS navigation system incorporates real-time traffic reports and can sort through multiple destinations to "provide an efficient route for errands." Green bloggers say these new technologies help save gas (and thus carbon emissions).

**Comment:** Mixed review from panelists. One scored it an 8 saying "smart technology like this



that improves efficiency while enhancing driving experience are important advances." Another pinged with a 2, saying "the greenest option would be a GPS that told you to get out of your car and walk, take public transit or your bike."

**Eco-rank:** 5



Ekobo Bamboo Box Knife Holder

### *Bamboo Box Knife Holder by Ekobo*

**Price/retailer:** \$49 for small holder, [www.vivaterra.com](http://www.vivaterra.com)

**Description:** Retailer VivaTerra dubs boxes the most "eco-savvy kitchen knife holders we've seen anywhere." Hundreds of thin bamboo skewers stand in the interior of a bamboo rectangle to hold knives.

**Comment:** Product is made in Vietnamese bamboo villages by France-based Ekobo; green bloggers have cheered the fair-trade working conditions. Our experts varied: One called it "inventive," though noted that it might be greener if bamboo skewers were made of, say, recycled old chopsticks. Another

said there were other renewable wood varieties grown in U.S. that don't have to be shipped from overseas. We skewered our fingers adjusting spokes but found nine knives slipped in easily and were displayed more attractively than in our old wooden block.

**Eco-rank:** 5

### *Recycled Glass Champagne Flutes*

**Price/retailer:** \$48 for set of 4, [www.sundancecatalog.com](http://www.sundancecatalog.com)

**Description:** Hand-blown recycled-glass flutes can transform libations into "glasses of earth-friendly good cheer," according to Sundance catalog. Made in Spain.

**Comment:** One expert noted that hand-blown glass requires tremendous heat and energy. Another said eco-savvy consumers should ask how much recycled glass was used (Sundance customer-service rep says 100%) and whether it was "post-consumer" waste (rep didn't know), and said shipping from Spain could hurt on carbon-emission front. Still, overall, good marks for not using virgin glass.

**Eco-rank:** 6



Dean & DeLuca's California Estate Osetra Caviar

### *Dean & DeLuca California Estate Osetra Caviar*

**Price/retailer:** \$78 (1 ounce), [www.deandeluca.com](http://www.deandeluca.com)

**Description:** Caviar from domestic sturgeon farm-raised in "artesian" water and fed natural foods.

**Comment:** Most of our eco-experts bowed out on this one, though one noted it might be worth looking for a third-party certification, such as the Marine Stewardship Council, before trusting claims outright. Polite

customer-service reps confirmed that sturgeon is native to Sacramento, but didn't have certification info. "Artesian" water refers to groundwater under sufficient pressure to rise into wells without pumping. Dean & DeLuca says this means the sturgeon are separated in pools from the wild population of fish so they don't have to compete for food and other resources.

**Eco-rank:** None

### *The Amazing Water Clock by Princess International*

**Price/retailer:** \$12.99, [www.thinkgeek.com](http://www.thinkgeek.com)

**Description:** Powered by water (or beer, coffee or other liquids with electrolytes), clock requires no batteries or electricity -- instead it has an energy converter that extracts electrons from water molecules, forming its own electric current. Shows month, day and time in large digital display. "Think Green Save the Planet!" the box reads. Made in China.

**Comment:** Panel dubbed it a cool learning tool, particularly for kids, but noted that most small desk clocks don't use much electricity. Clock wouldn't work with our tap water so we added table salt as directions suggested and it powered right up. Even if you forget to refill, there's forgiveness; kept time for 24 hours after we emptied fuel cells.

**Eco-rank:** 4



### *Slim Portfolio Handbag by Ecoist*

**Price/retailer:** \$96, [www.ecoist.com](http://www.ecoist.com)

**Description:** Made from recycled candy wrappers.



Handbag by Ecoist

**Comment:** One expert asked: "Is this real? Is there a market for this stuff?" and gave it a -1 rating. Another noted it's just using more energy to make and transport more stuff. We're more forgiving, figuring you can't keep women from buying new handbags and an eco-version is better than one made with virgin materials. Plus, candy wrappers often

don't get recycled since their fused materials are tough to pull apart. New uses keep them out of landfills.

**Eco-rank:** 3 (with only 2 people ranking)



Calvin Klein organic towels

### *Calvin Klein Home Organic Towels*

**Price/retailer:** \$43.75 for bath towel, [www.macys.com](http://www.macys.com)

**Description:** 100% organic cotton towels with 100% organic vegetable dyes. Certified by Netherlands-based group SKAL, which examines organic production.

**Comment:** The panel generally likes organic cotton because pesticides aren't used during growing.

**Eco-rank:** 6

### *Aspen Copper Tub by Native Trails*

**Price/retailer:** \$19,700, [www.nativetrails.net](http://www.nativetrails.net)

**Description:** For its hand-crafted tubs, Native Trails uses recycled copper from used electrical wire, pipes and construction copper melted into sheets. Web site says copper is health-friendly because it's anti-bacterial.

**Comment:** Again, our experts diverged: Two approved of recycled copper and confirmed its anti-bacterial properties, though given the price tag, said to make sure you really *need* a copper tub. The third railed against dropping nearly 20 grand when that could be spent weatherizing a house or buying a fuel-efficient car. For our part, if we could afford it, we'd consider it because copper heats up fast and solves the problem of using a lot of hot water to make a cold tub bearable.

**Eco-rank:** 4

**Write to** Gwendolyn Bounds at [wendy.bounds@wsj.com](mailto:wendy.bounds@wsj.com)

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