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CT Outdoors – Oh Peanuts

By Suzanne Thompson

Even in these austere times, when there may have been fewer gifts under your Christmas tree, or perhaps gifting this year took on a more rudimentary approach: groceries, cash for heating oil, or re-gifted items, and fewer of those perplexing things someone gave you that you never really knew what to do with, there's always the post-holiday hang-over question: What to do with the mountains of packaging peanuts?

Convenient to a fault, plastic polystyrene peanuts have had a population explosion in recent years, mostly thanks to the growth of Internet shopping. With the advent of Cyber Monday, no doubt you have a spare box or bag of them lying around the house.

Admit it, you're tempted to set packing peanuts out with the trash, right? Or maybe on recycling day—towns must accept these things, right? After all, many municipalities pick up Christmas trees soon after the holidays.

Most of our packing peanuts are chemical based, which means they will be around forever. While they aren't recyclable, they can be reused many times, according to Janice Ehle/Meyer, recycling coordinator for the Connecticut River Estuary Regional Planning Agency (CRERPA) in Old Saybrook, which serves the nine communities on either bank of the river or next door along the Sound.

Ehle/Meyer suggests checking with local packaging services, antique shops, and eBay auctioneers who may be in constant need of packing materials. Back in October, in the middle of my fall cleaning attack, Office Express in the Old Lyme Marketplace gladly accepted my peanuts.

The peanuts must be clean and dry, whether you're storing them yourself for next year, or handing them off to someone else.

No, although I have many home remedies drilled into my brain, thanks to my Depression-scarred parents, peanut washing isn't one of them. Those things became ubiquitous much later than the 1930s.

As packers and shippers also look for more green products, you might find that some packing peanuts are made from a vegetable derivative and will break down in our environment. It's hard to tell the difference, unless you get a few wet. If they disintegrate, they are made from vegetable matter. If not, they simply float.

If you're still at a loss for what to do with your allotment, Ehle/Meyer suggests contacting the Plastic Loosefill Council at 800-828-2214 for a list of drop-off centers. Or, if you have massive quantities, contact the Alliance of Foam Packaging Recyclers at 410-451-8340.

Whether we re-purpose our peanuts or not, Americans at least entered the holidays with the intention of being greener gifters, according to Plow and Hearth (www.plowandhearth.com), a national catalogue and Internet retailer that specializes in home and lifestyle products.

More than half of Americans said they were likely to purchase environmentally friendly gifts, according to P&H. Although money was listed as the single largest obstacle, up to two thirds said respondents were willing to spend 10 to 25 percent more to “go green,” and women were more likely than men to do so. Those were September or October sentiments, so it would be interesting to see if actions followed intentions.

When she's not writing or talking, Suzanne Thompson can be found puttering around her gardens in Old Lyme. Contact Suzanne at sthompson@wliswmrd.net.