

Winter Comfort & Sustainable Celebrations in the Okanagan

Summary:

December brings shorter days, colder temperatures, and festive celebrations across the Okanagan Valley. While we gather indoors for warmth, connection, and holiday activities, energy use and waste generation typically rise during this season. The heating systems in our homes work harder, lighting needs increase, and holiday shopping and travel place additional strain on the environment.

This month, we focus on mindful winter habits that help us stay warm while conserving energy, creating less waste, and embracing the spirit of sustainability. Whether we are studying indoors, spending time with family, or preparing for exams, simple actions can improve comfort, reduce costs, and contribute to a greener Okanagan.

Practical actions:

1. Lower the heating slightly and use layers or blankets when comfortable.
2. Use LED holiday lights and limit nightly operating hours.
3. Reduce food waste during celebrations by planning meals intentionally.
4. Choose reusable gift wrap or sustainable holiday packaging.
5. Improve indoor air quality by ventilating during short warm periods.

1. Keep Winter Heating Efficient and Comfortable

Why it matters:

- Heating is the single biggest source of winter energy use in the Okanagan. Older homes and rentals often lose heat quickly due to drafts, outdated windows, or uninsulated basements. Improving heating efficiency not only cuts utility bills but also reduces demand on BC's electricity system during winter peaks.

What we can do:

- Keep the thermostats between **19 to 21°C** during the day and slightly lower while sleeping. Wear layers, use warm blankets, and place draft stoppers under doors. Let sunlight in during the day and close blinds or curtains at night to retain heat.

Local Tip:

- Many Okanagan buildings, especially older rentals near campuses, benefit from simple upgrades like door sweeps and window film. These low-cost improvements are sold at local hardware stores and can significantly increase winter comfort.
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2. Use LED Holiday Lighting and Smart Timer

Why it matters:

- December lighting creates a warm, festive atmosphere, but traditional incandescent holiday lights use significantly more electricity. Many households and student residences run lights for long hours, increasing energy consumption during peak-use winter months.

What we can do:

- Switch to **LED holiday lights**, which use up to 90% less energy. Use smart plugs or timers to limit lighting to a few evening hours (e.g., 5 to 10 PM). Turn off lights when leaving home or going to bed.
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3. Minimize Holiday Waste Through Sustainable Choices

Why it matters:

- Waste volumes in the Okanagan rise sharply every December due to packaging, wrapping paper, food waste, and single-use items. Much of this ends up in landfills, contributing to emissions and increased municipal handling costs.

What we can do:

- Choose **reusable gift bags**, recycled wrapping paper, or fabric wraps. Avoid disposable cutlery or plates during gatherings. Plan meals realistically to reduce leftovers and freeze extra food when possible.

Local Tip:

- Regional waste facilities in Kelowna, Vernon, and Penticton run seasonal recycling programs for holiday materials. Many accept string lights, cardboard, and packaging at no extra cost.
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4. Improve Indoor Air Quality During the Winter Months

Why it matters:

- With windows closed more often, indoor air quality declines. Dry, heated air and reduced ventilation can increase irritants like dust, smoke residue, and allergens, which affect concentration, sleep, and health, especially during exam season.

What we can do:

- Open windows briefly during warmer parts of the day to circulate fresh air. Use bathroom and kitchen fans to remove moisture. Keep furnace filters clean and vacuum regularly to reduce dust buildup.

Local Tip:

- Kelowna's dry winter air can lead to increased dust. Periodically opening windows for just 5 to 10 minutes allows a "fresh air flush" without significantly cooling homes.

5. Choose Low-Impact Transportation During Holiday Travel

Why it matters:

- December is one of the busiest travel months, often leading to increased traffic congestion and emissions. Winter road conditions can also increase fuel use

What we can do:

- Carpool when attending gatherings. Use BC Transit where routes allow or combine errands to reduce multiple trips. For local visits, consider walking if the weather permits. Take advantage of OC's Ride Shark platform for sustainable travel.