

Area residents get crafty at the holidays

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Most garages are filled with cars or tools or lawn mowers. But the garage of Connie Cusick's Fairfield home is full of possibilities.

There are dried cotton stems that she hopes to make into Christmas decorations; a couple bolts of embellished green material that she hopes to make into table runners; "platters" crafted from an old tree that she hopes to pair with candles for holiday gifts.

For Cusick, a life coach with a jewelry design business, everything is better when it's homemade. She loves making decorations out of ribbons, pinecones and recycled ornaments she's picked up at tag sales. She adores re-purposing vintage jewelry into new pieces to give as gifts or sell through her business, Notting Hill Jewelry. Cusick lives to create.

Thus, for years, her holiday gifts have been a mix of the purchased and the do-it-yourself. But this year, she's not buying any gifts for her friends, relying instead on the materials in her garage and an arsenal of other crafting tools scattered around her house to provide memorable holidays for those close to her. "I'm tired of paying for [gifts]," Cusick explained. "And I love doing this."

Her attitude isn't an uncommon one these days. With the economy still in dire straits, many are choosing to make, rather than buy, gifts this year. According to the National Retail Federation's survey on holiday spending, 65.3 percent of the 8,431 respondents polled said the economy would affect their holiday spending plans

in some way. Of those, about 16.7 percent planned to cut costs by making more gifts for family and friends.

Among those predisposed to crafting, the percentage opting to create holiday gifts was even higher. The arts and crafts chain store Michaels polled customers from Michaels database earlier this year and, of the roughly one thousand who responded, 65 percent said they plan on making gifts this year. That's up from 58 percent in last year's poll.

Ruthe Ploskunyak, a Fairfield resident and longtime crafter, has also seen many people in the region channeling their creative sides in an attempt to save a little cash. Ploskunyak is president of the Connecticut Chapter of the American Sewing Guild, a non-profit organization for sewing enthusiasts. Earlier this year, the chapter held a series of workshops across the state, at which members taught a total of 75 people how to mend and refurbish their own clothes. Ploskunyak said, though some workshops attracted only 6 or 7 participants, she and the other guild members were impressed by how enthusiastic attendants were about learning basic sewing skills. She

attributes that in part to the economy. In times like these, she said, people want to do whatever they can to cut costs. So, if learning to sew can help them extend the life of their clothes, why not do it?

The same logic extends to gift-giving. Ploskunyak said she's always made a significant portion of her holiday gifts, but it makes even more sense in the midst of this financial crisis. "There's a lot of junk available," she said. "If you can make a better quality product for less money, you would do it."

Kristen LaViola, owner of Manifest Beads in Milford, echoed that statement. The store offers a variety of beads and other jewelry-making material, as well as an in-store workspace where customers can create such items as bracelets and necklaces from scratch. LaViola said Manifest's business has increased significantly this year and the store is actually having its best season ever in this still-grim economy.

In fact, she said, the financial crisis might be the cause of Manifest's booming business. Making jewelry is often much less expensive than buying a finished piece, so the store is appealing to people who want to give a nice gift without spending a bundle. "You can make a bracelet for under \$10 rather than buy one for \$25 or \$30," LaViola said.

Gifts aren't the only things one might choose to create from scratch. Many people, like Cusick, prefer to make at least some of their holiday decorations as well. Several places around the region are hosting workshops that allow participants to make their own wreaths and other holiday adornments, including the Milford Fine Arts Council's Firehouse Art Gallery.

Last month, the gallery hosted a wreath-making workshop that attracted about 10 people. This is the first time the gallery hosted the workshop, so it's hard to tell whether economic concerns affected attendance, said Frieda Howling, a gallery volunteer. However, she said, it's likely that many people in these challenging times might prefer a homemade wreath to a purchased one. "The ready made ones are pretty expensive," Howling said.

But saving money is only one of the reasons that someone might choose to make, rather than buy, gifts, decorations and the like, said Victor Domine, public relations manager of the Craft and Hobby Association. The association is a national business-to-business trade association representing the craft industry and the hobby industry.

Domine said roughly half of all American households craft and many of them are probably doing it to save money. "There is a financial benefit to crafting," he said.

However, Domine said, people who craft often do so for a variety of reasons, not solely to cut costs. Some people see crafts as a way to socialize with others who enjoy their pastime of choice. Others find it therapeutic to sit down and make something. "People feel really, really great when they finish a project," he said.

They also feel really great when they can offer a friend or family member a gift that's far more personal and unique than the typical store-bought fare. "People are turning to crafting to create one-of-a-kind keepsake gifts," Domine said.

Locally, Cusick agreed that homemade holiday gifts can actually be better than the purchased variety, even if they're not perfect. "What's Christmas about, anyway?" Cusick asked. "Is it about gift-giving? No. It's about sharing."

Cusick is hoping to spread that sharing spirit by encouraging friends and associates to also make their own holiday presents. This year, she said, she's hosting a gift-swap party for her friends. The twist? All the gifts exchanged must be homemade. Also, Cusick is encouraging all of the clients of her life-coaching business, Define Yourself Coaching, to create meaningful gifts for their loved ones -- even if that "gift" is something as basic as cooking someone a special dinner or having a cherished photo framed at a local art store.

When you make something, even something small, you aren't just saving money, Cusick said -- you're making a personal statement about how much you care for the recipient. "It's giving a part of yourself," Cusick explained.

Ploskunyak agreed. She said, despite the perception some people have of crafting, making a gift doesn't have to be a laborious process. One of the gifts she's giving this year is a homemade facial scrub, which involved simply mixing together some sugar and oils. "This is not rocket science," she said. "There's a lot of stuff that anybody can do."

Interested in making your own holiday gifts or decorations? Try some of these classes and workshops. Fairfield Museum and History Center, 370 Beach Road Fairfield, is hosting a string of workshops where participants can make their own gifts. On Tuesday at 4:30 p.m., learn to make decorative placemats featuring your own design painted on canvas. The cost is \$10 for museum members and \$15 for non-members. At 4:30 p.m. Thursday, you can learn to make sparkling earrings and necklaces from glass beads.

The cost is \$15 for members; \$20 for non-members. And, on Thursday, Dec. 17, at 4:30 p.m. learn to cover and sew a book with Coptic-style binding -- perfect for your favorite scrapbook-lover or writer. The cost is \$10 for members; \$15 for non-members. Workshops are for ages nine to adult. Pre-registration is required. For details, visit www.fairfieldhs.org or call 203-259-1598. Plumb Memorial Library, 65 Wooster St., Shelton, will host a family wreath-making workshop from 10 a.m. to noon Saturday. Come decorate pre-made evergreen wreath forms.

Members of the Olde Ripton Garden Club will help with hints and ideas, the library provides the decorations and ribbons, and School Readiness Council members will offer extra hands. The program is free. The event is for kids ages 4 and up with parents. Registration is required. Call 203-924-1580. The Ansonia Nature Center, 10 Deerfield Road, will host a workshop on making your own evergreen wreath or swag at the Ansonia Nature Center at 1 p.m. Saturday.

Celebrate the festive season by using locally grown fresh green to create a wreath or swag and decorate it with natural trimmings. If you have one, bring a wreath frame 12 inches or smaller.

Everythings else will be supplied. There will be a small materials fee. Please register by Thursday. **Manifest Beads, 51 River St., Milford, holds regular jewelry making classes. For a schedule, visit the store's web site at www.manifestbeads.com. For more information, call 203-877-7778.**