

How to battle false expectations of holiday season

Staff Reports

OK, once again, it's that time of year when you grit your teeth, paste on a smile and head home for the holidays. This year, you say, things will be perfect.

Elvis Presley croons "White Christmas" in your head, and you have dreams of a sickly sweet family gathering, complete with hugs and festive red sweaters. Perfect.

But just in case you fall into bed Dec. 25 with your naive little heart broken, read on and find comfort. After all, when anticipating the holidays, we're subject to images that build false expectations. Here are 12 myths of the holiday season.

1. A white Christmas season is normal in most parts of the United States. Sorry folks, but South Carolina just isn't Antarctica. You'll have to keep dreaming for a white Christmas because there's only a 5 percent chance people here will have one and only a 40 percent chance for people in the mid-section of the country, said Greg Carbone, a climatologist and geography professor at USC.

"People have images of snowy Christmases from paintings of a colder Europe a century ago, but in reality most of the United States won't see snow," he said. "Unless you're at a high elevation, live in the northern tier states or live downstream from large lakes, such as the Great Lakes, chances are you won't see white on Christmas."

He said Christmas is relatively early in the winter season, so conditions for snowfall and for snow to stick have to be correct.

2. The suicide rate is highest at Christmas. While depression is high during the Christmas season, the suicide rate is low during that time said Ron Maris, a USC professor and suicidologist.

"Christmas has ceremonies, rituals, church services and is more likely to have uplifting themes," Maris said. "However, when there is a prolonged holiday, many people miss their work and become isolated and depressed if they don't have family and friends to interact with."

3. Pets make good Christmas gifts. Despite the cute pictures of a puppy peeping out of a stocking, Christmas is not the best time to introduce a pet to the family.

"Bringing a pet into the household requires a lot of preparation," said veterinarian Dr. Robert Beattie, director of USC's Animal Resource Facility.

"Christmas means additional activity and stress in most families, making it difficult for children and adults to bond with the pet."

A pet requires commitment. It's not like a sweater or a tie that you can put in a drawer if you don't like it.

"If you want to give a pet, I suggest giving an 'IOU' for a dog or cat that can be brought into a home when preparations have been made," he said.

4. Wait until Christmas Eve to get the best buy on gifts. Retailers used to condition the consumer to wait until the last minute for the best buy, but not anymore, said James Overstreet, director of USC's Center for Retailing.

"Retailers are coming out earlier each year with big sales to keep people from waiting until the last minute," he said. "If you notice, retailers keep making it more attractive to spend early."

And that includes cataloguers, who are enticing people to order early for free gifts and postage.

People who wait until the last minute to shop also find that the merchandise has been picked over, and they have to settle for what's left.

5. Charge your Christmas purchases. You'll pay them off later. It's more sensible, a lot less stressful and cheaper if you save for Christmas instead of struggling to pay bills, plus the interest, after the holiday, said Steven Mann, a USC finance professor.

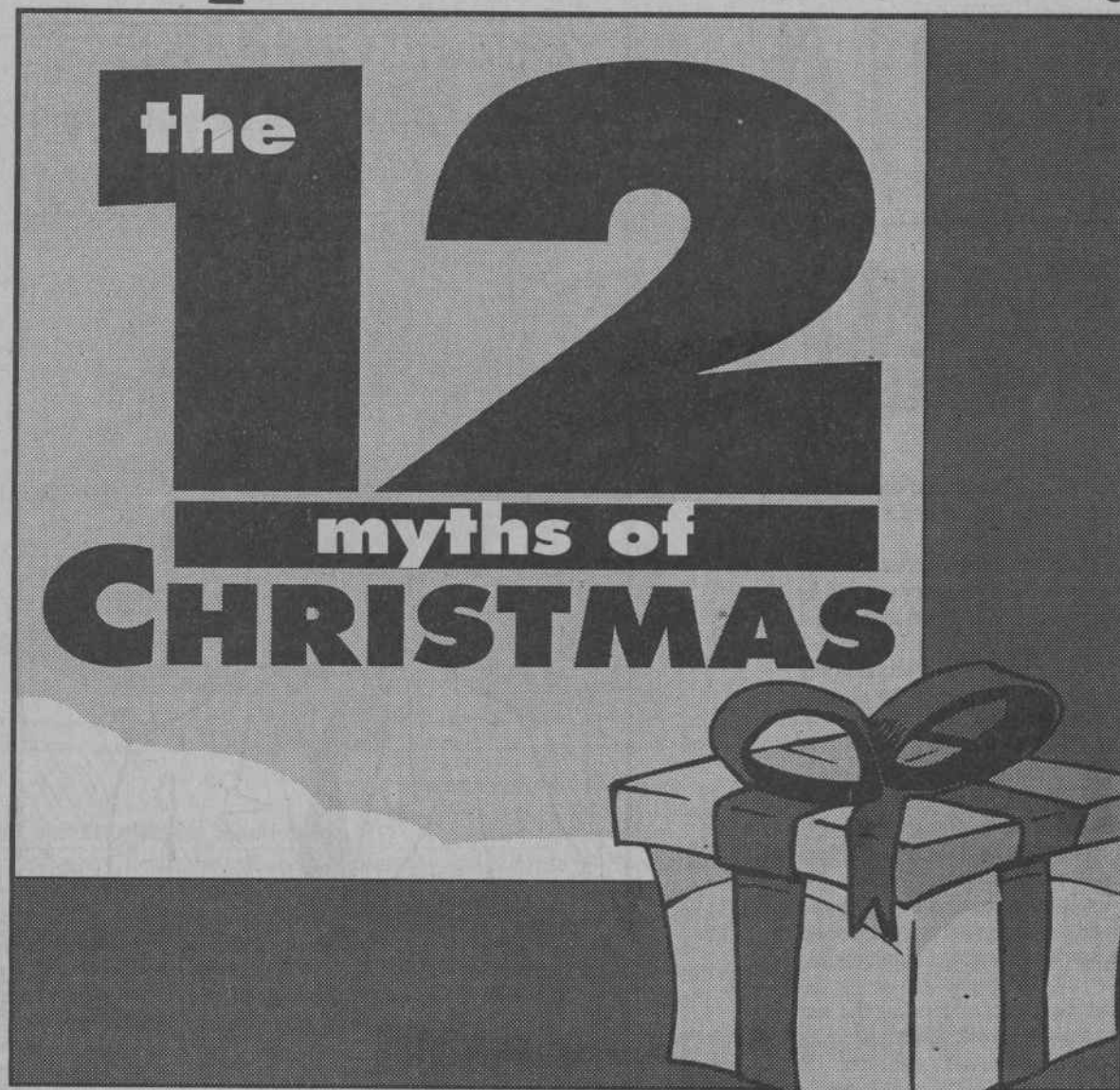
"The general rule is don't use your credit card to pay for something you can't afford when the bill comes," Mann said. "But people get caught up in gift giving and forget they'll have other bills during January, such as mortgage payments and car repairs."

Mann said the best way to buy Christmas presents is with money you put away each month during the year before Christmas. The money collects interest and it's there for you to enjoy during November and December.

6. Chanukah is the Jewish Christmas. They both start with the letter "C," are celebrated in December, commemorate an historical occurrence, gifts are exchanged and candles are lit. But that's where the similarities between Christmas and Chanukah end.

Chanukah, also spelled Hanukkah and Hanukkah, is not the Jewish Christmas, said Dr. Carl Evans, associate professor and chairman of religious studies at USC.

"While Christmas commemorates



the birth of Jesus, Chanukah does not celebrate the birth of Christ in any way," he said. "Christmas is a major red-letter day for Christians, and Chanukah is considered a minor holiday for Jews."

Chanukah is the Hebrew word for "rededication" and commemorates the victory of the Maccabees, a group of five Jewish brothers and their followers, over the Syrians in 164 B.C.

7. Buying a live tree hurts the environment. Buying a real Christmas tree actually is more environmentally friendly, said Christopher Thomas, environmental quality manager of USC's Office of Waste Reduction and Recycling.

"Artificial trees are produced in factories, and with any production process comes pollution and waste," Thomas said. "Meanwhile, natural trees are

constantly cleaning the air supply by replenishing oxygen."

Thomas said it's important if you do buy a live tree to dispose of it in a responsible way.

"Have it mulched into chips and landscape materials, so there isn't any waste," said Thomas. "Please don't put it in the landfill."

8. Poinsettias are poisonous. It's true that poinsettias come from the toxic euphorbia family, but you'd have to eat 50 to 75 plants for them to be toxic, said Dr. Brooks Metts, director of the Palmetto Poison Center at USC.

He said the poinsettia got a bad rap at the turn of the century when the death of a child in Hawaii was blamed on the plant. However, about 15 years ago researchers found it to be relatively safe.

Other plants to be concerned about during Christmas are holly, mistletoe and English Ivy. But Metts says you have to eat more than a few berries or leaves to have any problems.

9. You have to have turkey or ham for Christmas dinner. There is no written rule that you have to center your holiday meal around a meat dish, said Dr. Roger Sargent, a nutritionist and professor in the USC School of Public Health.

"It may be tradition, but it's one that is not in our best health interest," he said. "Go for creativity, not tradition. Be a change agent."

Sargent suggests having a beautiful sweet potato dish as the centerpiece, with plenty of grains, pastas and low-fat sauces.

"Sometimes changing behavior may seem dull at first, but if people made better choices on these festive days, we'll have more festive days to enjoy."

10. You have to have a drink to celebrate. Thirty-eight percent of adults drink one or no alcoholic drinks a year, said Rick Gant, coordinator of Student Life programs at USC.

"I think that shows that obviously people don't have to have alcohol in social situations," he said. "You can still have eggnog or punch, but it doesn't have to have alcohol in it."

He said many people are already depressed during the holidays, and adding alcohol to that can make them even more depressed.

11. Give children what they want, and they'll be happy. So you gave in and reached deep into your pocket to give Bobby the battery-powered car he wanted and Molly the doll that cries. But chances are after a few days these sophisticated toys will begin to gather dust.

"Many newfangled toys don't stimulate a child's creativity," said Dr. Irma Van Zooy, a USC child development expert. "The toys do the work, and there's no room for imagination and make-believe."

She recommends classic toys, such as balls, bikes, puzzles, building blocks and plain dolls.

"When in doubt about choosing a child's toy, parents should look back to their own childhood and recall the toys that they enjoyed," she said.

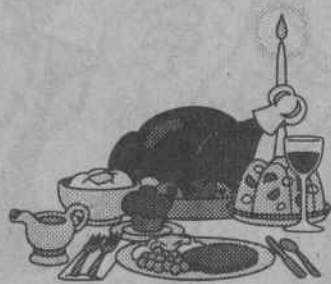
12. You have to spend the holidays with family. While Christmas is a wonderful time to spend with relatives, don't do it at the expense of your happiness, said Dr. Clyde Flanagan, a psychiatrist and professor at the USC School of Medicine.

"When visiting the in-laws, grandparents and cousins becomes a stressful traveling marathon, it may be time to make a change," he said. "As the needs of a growing family change, don't get locked into thinking only routine is possible."

He suggests inviting family members to your home on alternate years. It may be easier for many relatives, such as retired grandparents, to visit you. And, he said, it's important for your immediate family to establish its own traditions, so you'll build your own memories at home.

University Tree Lighting
Sunday, December 10, 1995
USC Horseshoe
6:30 pm

Learn about winter holiday traditions of Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa.
See the beautiful historic USC Horseshoe aglow with hundreds of luminaries!
Enjoy refreshments provided by the Honors College!
Join in singing traditional holiday songs!



Sponsored by Carolina Cares, Office of Community Service Programs, Department of Student Life, and Division of Student Affairs
For more information, call 777-6688