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**HOLIDAYS: Don’t let cyber criminals steal your holiday joy**

By Mary Hightower

U of A System Division of Agriculture

**Fast facts:**

* Shop with sites you trust
* Maintain a healthy skepticism about unfamiliar sites

(320 words)

LITTLE ROCK — Dropping your guard can enable internet criminals to turn your joyful holiday shopping into a time of anger, stress and loss.

Diana Morian, director of extension IT for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, warns that cyber criminals are constantly upping their game.

“One trick cyber scammers are using successfully is setting up fake online stores that look like the legitimate ones,” she said. “Scammers make sure these fake stores are easy to find while you conduct online searches for the best deals.”

These fake stores often have images, logos and working payment options that can fool users into thinking they’ve navigated to the real thing.

“Unfortunately, making purchases from these sites mean you will likely end up receiving, at best, stolen or counterfeit merchandise, or, at the very worst, nothing at all,” Morian said.

It helps to develop a healthy skepticism about great retail deals online, and to take time to think before clicking.

“It’s old wisdom, but if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is,” she said.

Morian offers a few tips on indicators that a shopping site might not be all it pretends to be:

* CONTACT — Is there contact information listed on the site? Are the contact forms broken or the toll-free number not working? Or does the email address look more like a personal address instead of a corporate one?
* STICK WITH WHAT YOU KNOW — Bookmark and use sites you’ve shopped before and trust.
* REALISTIC FAKES — Does the website look right, but the domain name doesn’t? Many scammers will use the names of legitimate outfits in combination with other words to create a sense of realism.
* DUE DILIGENCE — If you’re not sure about a retail site, try searching for that URL and see if you find comments about “fraud” or “scam,” or “fake.”
* READ THE REVIEWS — For sites that have third-party sellers, be sure to read the reviews to help gauge whether the seller is trustworthy.

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The Division of Agriculture is one of 20 entities within the University of Arkansas System. It has offices in all 75 counties in Arkansas and faculty on five system campuses.

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