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4 Holiday hosting in small spaces
5 Tips for making better Christmas cookies
6 Holiday gifts for four-legged family members
7 Tips for safe holiday entertaining in pet-friendly households
8 How to make holiday wreaths the easy way
9 Gifting those who live far away
10 How to create a durable gingerbread house
11 The 12 days of Christmas
Gatherings of family and friends are a big part of the holiday season. Hosting such gatherings can be a great way to show loved ones how much you appreciate them, and hosting also saves hosts the trouble of traveling during one of the most hectic travel seasons of the year.

When hosting a large crowd at home, space can be a difficult hurdle to clear. However, a few helpful strategies can help space-starved hosts pull off a holiday soiree where everyone is comfortable.

- **Pare down the menu.** Holiday feasts don’t have to resemble medieval banquets with excessive amounts of food and drink. Hosts with small kitchens and tiny dining quarters can pare down the menu, limiting offerings to just a single entree and a few simple side dishes, so everyone feels comfortable at the table and has ample room to eat. A small menu also gives hosts more time to spend with their loved ones during the festivities.

- **Don’t overdo it on drinks, either.** When planning the drinks menu, avoid offering cocktails, which take time to prepare and often require guests to visit the kitchen for refrigerated ingredients. Limit drinks to wine, beer, water, and soft drinks, storing cold beverages in a cooler kept outside on a front or back porch or in an area outside the kitchen so cooks can work without interruption.

- **Move some furniture.** If your main living space is small, consider moving some bulky furniture into a bedroom or office where guests won’t be spending time. Then make better use of the open living space by placing folding chairs or other accommodations to ensure there’s ample seating for everyone. A single recliner can only be enjoyed by one person, but removing it from a room may create enough space for as many as three folding chairs.

- **Go small on decorations.** If you know you’ll be hosting in advance of the holiday season, decorate with guests in mind. That might mean skipping a six-foot Christmas tree in favor of one that takes up less space. Avoid leaving any fragile decorations out, as adults or overexcited kids may knock them over as they try to navigate a cramped space.

Holiday hosting can be fun, even in small spaces. A few simple tricks can make even the smallest spaces accommodating.
Cookies and other baked treats are everywhere come the holiday season. It’s not uncommon to give cookies as gifts or arrive at holiday gatherings with cakes and other decadent desserts.

Cookies are a classic holiday treat, and some families even build entire traditions around baking Christmas cookies.

Novice bakers making cookies for the first time may be a little overwhelmed when perusing recipes. Baking is a science, and sometimes it takes practice to get the results just right. However, there are some tips that can help yield better, buttery bounties.

Handle butter with care
Butter can make or break a cookie recipe, as butter is often the glue that holds the cookie together. Therefore, it is key to follow the directions carefully regarding how to handle butter. Smithsonian.com says to leave butter at room temperature for 30 to 60 minutes to properly soften it. This takes patience, but fiddling with butter too much can damage its delectable integrity. While purists may say butter is best, margarine may be acceptable if it has a high fat content; otherwise, cookies may spread out and flatten.

When it comes time to cream the butter with sugar, be sure to do so thoroughly to incorporate air into the butter and remove the grainy texture of the sugar.

Measure flour properly
Measuring flour the right way can ensure cookies come out right. The Cooking Channel says to spoon the flour lightly into a dry measuring cup, then level it off with a knife. Do not dip the measuring cup into the flour or tap the knife against the cup. This will pack too much flour into the measuring cup and result in dry, tough cookies.

Slow down the eggs
Add eggs one at a time to make sure each will emulsify properly with the fat in the butter. Adding eggs en masse may cause the emulsification to fail.

Chill out
Follow recipes that call for chilling cookie dough carefully. This process is important for making sliced and shaped cookies. By chilling, the dough becomes more malleable for rolling and even slicing.

Use a bottom rack
Too much heat may compromise cookie integrity. The food experts at Delish say to try moving cookies onto a lower rack in the oven if they aren’t retaining their shape when baked. Put an empty cookie sheet on the top rack. That will block the cookies from the most intense heat that rises to the top of the oven.

Mastering cookies takes a little patience and some trial and error. Once bakers get their feet wet, Christmas-cookie-baking becomes even more special.
Holiday shoppers who are busy making lists and checking them twice should make sure they don’t overlook the family pet. Christmas has gone to the cats and dogs, as a greater number of people include their companion animals when selecting gifts each year.

Pet owners who plan to get their pets gifts this year may want to consider some of the emerging pet trends as they browse wares and services. The Balance, a business, career and industry information site, says pet industry trends point toward these segments seeing growth.

**Natural pet products**

Just as people are interested in protecting the health of the planet and their own personal health, so, too, are they extending this concern to companion animals. Natural pet products, which can include natural flea and tick remedies, holistic foods, organic items, and all-natural grooming products, can make great gifts.

**Specialty pet services**

The American Pet Products Association says the demand for high-end pet grooming and other services is substantial. In addition, personalized training, behavioral consulting, portrait photography, dog sitting, and upscale spa treatments like pet Reiki and massage are booming.

**Mobile pet grooming**

Mobile pet grooming has become the norm in many areas. Mobile pet grooming can reduce the potential stress on animals, and tends to be very convenient for customers, particularly seniors and others who have mobility issues.

Beyond these growing trends, pet owners have a bevy of other ideas from which to choose. Here are just a few different suggestions:

- Tests to detect pets’ DNA and trace breed and ancestry,
- Interactive puzzles to keep pets engaged and banish boredom,
- Stylish storage baskets for pet toys,
- Hidden cat litter or dog crate items that camouflage commonly used pet items,
- Heated pet bed for cozy nights and mornings, and
- Signature vests, coats and sweaters to look good and remain comfortable.

Pet gifts are popular this time of year, ensuring all members of the family have a treat to open.
The holidays are a time to spend with friends and family. Celebrating and entertaining are large components of what makes Thanksgiving, Christmas, Chanukah, and New Years festivities so enjoyable. Holiday hosts with pets must consider companion animals when planning the festivities.

The holiday season brings added dangers for pets. The American Veterinary Association notes that, by keeping hazards in mind, pet owners can ensure their four-legged friends enjoy the season as much as everyone else.

• Secure the tree. Securely anchor the Christmas tree so that it won’t tip over on anyone, including rambunctious pets. Also, stagnant tree stand water can grow bacteria. If a pet should drink the water, it may end up with nausea or diarrhea. Replenish the tree basin with fresh water daily.

• Skip the candles. When creating mood lighting, opt for electronic or battery-powered lights instead of open flames. Pets may knock over candles, and that can be an instant fire hazard.

• Keep food out of reach. Situate food buffets beyond the reach of hungry and curious animals. Warn guests to promptly throw out their leftovers so that dogs and cats do not sneak away with scraps that may cause stomach upset or worse. Real Simple magazine warns that fatty foods can promote pancreatitis – a potentially dangerous inflammation of the pancreas that produces toxic enzymes and causes illness and dehydration. Small bones can get lodged in a pet’s throat or intestines as well.

• Avoid artificial sweeteners. Exercise caution when baking sugar-free desserts. The artificial sweetener xylitol can cause dogs’ blood pressure to drop to dangerously low levels. Xylitol is found in some toothpastes and gum, so tell overnight guests to keep their toiletries secure to avoid accidental exposure.

• Be cautious with cocktails. If the celebration will include alcoholic beverages, the ASPCA says to place unattended adult beverages where pets cannot reach them. Ingested alcohol can make pets ill, weak and even induce comas.

• Be picky about plants. Mistletoe, holly and poinsettias can be dangerous in pet-friendly households. These plants can cause gastrointestinal upset and may lead to other problems if ingested. Opt for artificial replicas instead. If guests bring flowers, confirm they are nontoxic to pets before putting them on display.

• Watch the door. Guests going in and out may inadvertently leave doors open. In such instances, pets who get scared or are door dashers may be able to escape the house. Put a note by the door to watch for escaping pets.

• Designate a safe space for pets. If the holiday hustle proves too much for cats, dogs, birds, and more, give the pet a safe, quiet spot away from the crowds. Holiday hosts should factor in pet safety when they open their homes to guests.
There are many different ways to decorate homes and businesses for the holidays. Tall evergreen trees are among the most visible symbols of the holiday season. However, wreaths hung on doors, windows or fences also are ubiquitous this time of year.

Wreaths adorn homes primarily during the holidays of Easter and Christmas. Wreaths have also been worn around the head or neck in ceremonial events around the globe for centuries. It is believed the first wreaths date back to ancient Greece and Rome. Members of the Greco-Roman society were known to hand-make ring-shaped items using fresh tree leaves, small fruits, flowers, and twigs. Oftentimes these headdresses symbolized a person's social status. Others suggest wreaths evolved to become a Christian symbol of immortality.

Regardless of how wreaths are viewed, many people like to display wreaths for the holidays. Wreaths can be purchased premade, but making a wreath on your own can make the holidays even more fun.

One of the easiest ways to make a wreath is to design it around a circular floral foam form. Gather supplies to make the wreath. For traditional wreaths, supplies will include sprigs of evergreen (real or artificial), ribbon, floral wire, bows, and artificial berries. Working around the foam form, arrange the boughs of evergreen, using the floral wire to wrap or pin into the foam itself. Keep the layers coming until you get the desired coverage. Embellish with a ribbon or place a bow.

The blog A Piece of Rainbow says that creating a wreath jig is an easy way to make a wreath. Cut a dollar-store laundry basket bottom from the top ring to make a template, on which you can place wreath-making materials so they keep their circular form. Use floral wire or natural jute string to tie the materials together. Experiment with fresh evergreen, twigs, holly branches, or whatever materials you choose.

Thick card stock also can serve as the wreath template. Attach artificial flowers or leaves, spray snow, ornaments, or other items to the card stock ring with a firm adhesive.

Many craft stores sell wreath forms made of natural vines that have been strung in a ring. These can be decorated in their entirety or left a little sparse to let the natural twine show through.

Wreaths may seem like complicated creations. But a little imagination and the right materials is all it takes to create a homemade wreath.
GIFTING THOSE WHO LIVE FAR AWAY

People move away for many reasons, including access to better jobs, a lower cost of living, mandatory job relocation, or to attend school. Some people enjoy seeing the world and make frequent travel part of their lifestyles.

Distant friends and family members may be out of sight but certainly not out of mind come the holidays. Even though not everyone can get together for Christmas dinner or to light the Chanukah menorah, there are ways to show those special people across the country – or around the world – just how much they are appreciated.

Although video chatting, texting and email can make it easier to stay in touch, distance can make sharing the holidays and gifts a bit more challenging. However, these gifting ideas and tips can make easy work out of sending holiday cheer across the globe.

Food
Food can be a one-size-fits all gift. Exploring the offerings of food gifts, one will quickly find there are all types of options. If a recipient is living overseas or on the opposite side of the country, gift a favorite local food from his or her hometown. Cookie or fruit bouquets can be shipped and are universally enjoyed gifts. Treat towers, popcorn, cheeses, and much more are available for holiday giving.

Consider size
Large, heavy items will cost more to ship. Therefore, small gifts may be more practical. Consult with the post office or a preferred shipping provider about their pricing. Otherwise, consider shipping directly to a loved one’s house. Online retailers usually give shoppers a choice of shipping address, and free or low-cost shipping may be included.

Leave ample time for delivery
The holiday season is a busy time of year for the shipping industry. While shipping companies try their best to get items to recipients in a timely manner, delays can occur. The best way to ensure that gifts arrive on time is to send them a week or two in advance, which also saves gift-givers from having to pay extra for rush shipping. The US Postal Service says international deliveries can take between seven and 21 days to arrive, so leave more time for overseas gifts.

Try a subscription service
Subscription services, such as beauty boxes, recipe boxes and meal kits, can be a great way to keep the gifts arriving long after the holidays have come and gone.

Avoid breakables
Stick to gifts that will ship well; otherwise, you may have to spend extra time and money wrapping and insuring items. Clothing gifts, blankets, stuffed animals, books, and other durable gifts can be shipped with ease and peace of mind.

Gifting loved ones who live far away requires a little extra effort. But that extra effort will show friends and family members just how much they’re loved.
Gingerbread cookies and houses are one of the many symbols of the holiday season, alongside Christmas trees and twinkling lights. In fact, few confections symbolize the holidays more so than gingerbread.

Many a child (or a child at heart) has spent hours carefully trying to create decorative gingerbread houses. Although gingerbread recipes span various cultures, gingerbread houses originated in 16th century Germany. The fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel” helped solidify the popularity of gingerbread, which became part of Christmas traditions.

Even though gingerbread houses can be fun to make, there’s no denying it can be exacting work – especially for those who strive for perfection. Prepackaged kits attempt to take some of the guesswork out of the equation, but those who are crafting from scratch can employ these tips as they build their gingerbread houses.

- **Go for form and not flavor.** Few gingerbread houses ever get eaten, so focus on finding a dough that will bake up rock hard as opposed to one that tastes good.

- **Get the right icing texture.** Pastry artist Catherine Beddall says royal icing is the preferred “glue” to adhere gingerbread pieces. Beddall says icing should be thick like peanut butter and not runny.

- **Mind the dough.** Do not roll out the gingerbread dough too thin or it may become brittle after being cooked. Always cut out shapes before the gingerbread is baked. Let the baked pieces sit overnight to cool completely before using them to build.

- **Patience is key.** Allow the icing to dry for at least a couple of hours after adhering each piece and before moving and handling the house, says Beddall. Work in stages so that individual items can be decorated and allowed to dry. Then the walls can be put together, followed by the roof pieces.

- **Kids likely will need help.** Children may not have the patience or steadiness to handle complete gingerbread construction. They can decorate the separate pieces of the house while the components are laying flat, which is easier for kids. Adults can do the main assembly later on.

- **Utilize a template.** Free-handing may not be easy. Cut out templates using cardboard or posterboard for various gingerbread pieces.

    One of the most important tips is to have fun. Don’t take gingerbread house making too seriously as a novice. Rather, enjoy the experience and the centuries-old tradition.
“On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me, a partridge in a pear tree.”

The familiar lyrics of this tune are sung as part of Christmas caroling and holiday celebrations, reaching a crescendo each time singers belt out “five golden rings.” The song is an English Christmas carol that was written in 1720. While it references plenty of gift-giving, it’s easy to assume the song is about giving Christmas gifts. However, the 12 days in the song actually refer to the birth of Jesus Christ.

The 12 days of Christmas, also known as the Twelvetide, refers to the festive Christian season that celebrates the Nativity of Jesus. In fact, the start of these days occurs on December 25 and extends until the evening of January 5th, the day before the Epiphany, known as Twelfth Night. Each day corresponds to a remembrance of different religious events or people.

Christmas celebrants can celebrate well into the new year. Commemorating the 12 days of Christmas can include small festivities from December 25 to January 5. On Twelfth Night, historically known for parties, modern-day fanfare can mark the culmination of the Christmas season – with the last of gift-giving occurring on the Epiphany.

Gifting, hosting friends and family, attending religious services, participating in charitable events, or opening one’s home to neighbors and those who can use some companionship are all ways to make the 12 days of Christmas more special.
Eat. Drink. Be Very Merry.

Peppertini

Ingredients:
2 candy canes, 1 finely crushed
1 1.5 fluid ounce vanilla vodka
1 fluid ounce of peppermint schnapps
1 fluid ounce of half-n-half cream

Directions:
Wet rim of chilled martini glass with water, dip into crushed candy cane. Pour the vodka schnapps and half-n-half into cocktail shaker over ice. Cover and shake, strain and garnish with candy cane.