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Holiday decor is as much about the sights and sounds as it is about the scents of the season. Few things evoke the holiday spirit as much as the aroma of fresh evergreen or spicy cinnamon and cloves. Incorporating inviting aromas into holiday decor can make homes feel even more special.

Filling a home with fragrant decor takes a little ingenuity and planning. Here are some ideas to incorporate the scents of the holiday season into your decor.

**Use a real Christmas tree.** An easy way to create a pine-like scent indoors is to select a real Christmas tree. Ask the tree farm which varieties are the most fragrant. If a fresh tree is not possible, fill a decorative basket with pine cones and evergreen boughs for that woodsy appeal.

**Create a seasonal scented simmer.** Take to the stove to make a homemade air infusion from ingredients in and around the house. Simmer pine branches, citrus peels, vanilla, nutmeg, cinnamon, and whatever else can be placed in a pot or slow cooker with water. The scents will permeate the house for hours if enough water is added to the mixture.

**Make holiday sachets.** Some of the same ingredients for the holiday simmer can be dried and sewn into sachets. Add ribbon and hang on real or artificial trees. Or tuck the pouches into various areas around the house.

**Experiment with scented candles.** Scented candles can be found at various stores during the holiday season. Select among popular holiday aromas like pine, cinnamon, apples, and Christmas cookie varieties.

**Utilize essential oils.** Natural food stores and other retailers may sell essential oils, which can be diluted and sprayed on surfaces or into the air. Exercise caution around upholstery, or test for staining before use.

**Spend more time in the kitchen.** Add delicious scents to the home by way of freshly baked goods or holiday meals. Nothing beats the smell of cookies right out of the oven, and the scents can linger for hours.

**Make beeswax ornaments.** Add scented oils to melted beeswax and pour into molds. Hang these creations as ornaments on trees or in other areas of the home.

**Craft some “gingerbread” ornaments.** A mixture of cinnamon, applesauce and glue can be used to make ornaments or gift tags that resemble gingerbread cookies, and these ornaments have more staying power than actual cookies.

**Design a pretty pomander.** Stud an orange with cloves. Cut off the top of the orange and hollow out a place for a small tea light. The warmth of the flame will produce more scent.

Rich and inviting aromas can fill a home with the holiday spirit.
Decorations help make the holiday season a magical time of year. Stores are awash in color and twinkling lights, and similar imagery is on display in private homes.

Designing holiday displays can be a great way for families to spend time together and kick off the celebration. In fact, according to Electrical Safety Foundation International, around 90 percent of Americans decorate their homes for the holidays.

When trimming the tree and decorating this holiday season, families must keep safety in mind. A little planning and some precautionary measures can ensure displays are enjoyed all season long. Travelers Insurance offers the following holiday decorating safety tips.

• Do not overload outlets. Plan displays according to the number and location of available outlets.
• Never exceed the maximum number of light strands that can be attached together.
• Use lights and products that have been tested for safety. Certification marks like UL, ETL and CSA are from nationally recognized laboratories.
• LED lights should be used whenever possible. Such lights consume less energy and run cooler than other bulbs.
• The ESFI says candles start almost 50 percent of all decoration fires. Minimize the risk by using candles only when they can be monitored. Artificial candles can be used in place of real candles.
• Check for freshness in live trees. A fresh tree will last longer and is less of a fire hazard than an old tree.
• Place Christmas trees at least three feet away from all heat sources, including fireplaces and heaters.
• Use decorations that are non-combustible or made from flame-resistant materials.
• Pay attention to the age recommendations of decorations to see if they can be used in homes with young children. Some items, however common, are choking or strangulation hazards.
• Avoid putting small, “mouth-sized” decorations near the ground or on lower limbs of trees, where young children can easily reach them.
• Exercise caution when hanging decorations at high heights. Make sure the ladder is secured and have a spotter who can hold the ladder and pass items up safely.
• Outdoor electric lights and decorations should be plugged into circuits protected by ground fault circuit interrupters, or GFCIs.
• Exercise caution when decorating near power lines that extend to the house.
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• Keep hung stockings far away from open flames so they do not catch any errant embers.

These are just a few suggestions for decorating a safely for the holiday season.
A jolly holiday season can be made even more merry with a roaring fire. Homeowners often build holiday tableaus around the fireplace to serve as festive backdrops. The mantle and the fireplace itself also may be a prime spot to dedicate to decorating this time of year. Even though Christmas tree fires are rare, according to the U.S. Fire Administration, when they do occur they’re likely to be serious. That is why trees and other flammable decorations need to be kept clear of gas and wood-burning fireplaces and stoves. In addition, many other guidelines should be heeded to ensure fireplaces and holiday decor safely coexist this season.

Read labels on decorative items carefully before decorating. Be sure to only select items that are flame-resistant or retardant. Cherished collectibles and other items should always be kept far away from open flames and heat.

It pays to have a fireplace inspected and cleaned for use prior to operation, advises Doherty Insurance Agency. Rely on a trained chimney sweep, and have the fireplace and chimney inspected and cleaned at least once per year.

Even though it may be picturesque, do not place wrapped packages or gift boxes near the fireplace, as they tend to be highly combustible. Keep presents and other flammable items at least three feet away from the fireplace.

Do not be tempted to dispose of wrapping paper, boxes or even a Christmas tree in the fireplace. Wrapping paper contains additives that make it burn at high temperatures. A Christmas tree hasn’t been properly seasoned and could be a fire hazard and potentially contribute to excessive smoke and creosote.

Keep decorations that kids will be tempted to touch away from the fireplace so kids do not hang out near the heat and open flames.

Fireplaces are often a focal point of holiday decorating and entertaining. Homeowners who want to incorporate their fireplaces into their holiday decor must emphasize safety when doing so.
Decorations and shopping draw much of the attention come the holiday season, and rightfully so. But many people's fondest holiday memories occurred around the dinner table during meals with friends and family.

Holiday foods tend to be rich, flavorful and time-consuming to prepare. However, all the effort is usually worth the satisfied smiles on the faces of loved ones.

Planning holiday meals is challenging, and hosts often doubt if they have enough food for everyone. No one wants guests to leave feeling hungry, nor do they want to have tons of leftovers, much of which will inevitably end up in the trash. Determining how much food to serve involves figuring out a few key items, including the mix of guests (ratio of children, men and women), the length of the occasion, the timing of the event, and the type of meal one plans to serve. For example, if the holiday gathering is an after-dinner cocktail party, hosts can get away with offering very little food.

However, hosts of holiday dinners have a lot more food to prepare.

To get started, consider these general guidelines, courtesy of Allrecipes.com and The Spruce, a home living resource.

Think about which foods you plan to serve. Popular foods tend to go more quickly than other items, so serve more than the general portion guidelines suggest. Shellfish appetizers, roasted or mashed potatoes, wings, and slices of rich meat are examples of popular fare.

The more foods you offer, the smaller the portion sizes can be. But because guests will likely want to try all the offerings, expect the average person to consume more food per individual when several foods are offered.

Most people will eat two to three portions each of appetizers or snacks. In fact, appetizers (for a hungry crowd) may be consumed in greater abundance than subsequent courses.

Average portion sizes for each guest include: 3 ounces of dips; 3 ounces of salad; 6 ounces of meat or main entrée; 5 ounces of starch; and 1 1/2 pieces of dessert. These estimates can be used to calculate how much food will be needed.

Think about adding "safety" items to the menu that can be pulled out in a pinch and don't require much prep work. These can include cheese and crackers, extra bread, nuts, olives, or pretzels.

Hosts who are overly concerned that guests may go overboard can tame portion sizes by hiring servers who can oversee buffet lines. Otherwise, serve guests plated meals directly from the kitchen, from which hosts can dole out the right amount of food to ensure everyone gets enough to eat.
Hosting for the holidays is a fun way to bring loved ones together during a special time of year. As enjoyable as hosting can be, it’s no small task, especially when guests have food allergies.

According to Food Allergy Research & Education, an organization dedicated to improving the quality of life and the health of individuals with food allergies, a food allergy is a medical condition in which exposure to a certain foods triggers a harmful immune system response. FARE® notes that more than 170 foods have been reported to cause allergic reactions, and roughly one in 13 children in the United States has a food allergy. And food allergies are not just a danger in the U.S., as data published in The Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology in 2015 revealed that 6.9 percent of Canadian children under the age of 18 self-report having at least one food allergy.

Food allergies are cause for concern, as FARE® notes that every three minutes a food allergy reaction sends someone to the emergency room. Before planning holiday menus, hosts should ask guests if they or their children have any food allergies and then plan the menu accordingly.

When hosting large gatherings, it may be impossible to avoid foods that trigger guests’ allergies. In such instances, the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America offers the following food safety tips to hosts.

- Wash hands before and after eating or handling food.
- Prevent cross-contamination in preparation and serving by preparing dishes in separate areas and washing all prep materials, such as cutting boards, before reusing. Keep unsafe foods away from safe foods at all times.
- Read all food labels.
- Prepare and cook safe meals first before sealing them and setting them aside. Then make unsafe foods.
- Use separate serving utensils for each dish. Be careful not to mix them up.
- Wash all prep areas and eating areas with a paper towel and commercial cleaner. Avoid using sponges and rags, which can be a source of allergens.
- Keep food isolated to one area of the home and clean up thoroughly after the meal.
- Make a plate for each child with food allergies before the meal is served to avoid cross contamination. Keep unsafe foods out of reach of young children with allergies.
- Request that children with food allergies sit close to their parents during the meal. Ensure that those eating nearby will be careful not to accidentally spill or share unsafe foods.
- Place packages of wipes near food and encourage everyone to wipe their hands after eating, though encouraging them to use soap and water is best. Walk around periodically to dispose of any uneaten food or dirty plates and napkins.

When planning holiday menus, hosts should always keep food allergies in mind. Taking steps to safeguard adults and children with food allergies can ensure everyone has a happy, healthy holiday.
Come the holiday season, many people look forward to gatherings with family and friends. Such gatherings are often held in private homes, and that means someone must take on the task of hosting. There are many advantages to hosting holiday gatherings. Hosts won’t have to travel during a notoriously busy time of year to take to the roads and sky. Hosts also won’t have to book hotel rooms or arrange for other accommodations, saving them money and time during a season that tends to be expensive and packed with social engagements. As the day of their holiday parties draws near, hosts can take several steps to make the day of the party easier, allowing them to spend more time with their family and friends.

Choose the right menu. The right menu can go a long way toward making hosting easier on the day of the party. Various factors, such as food allergies and the size of the guest list, must be considered when planning a holiday menu. As hosts scour cookbooks for the right foods, look for recipes that don’t require everything to be done on the day of the party. Prep work tends to take as much, if not more, time as cooking the foods. So look for recipes that allow you to do most, if not all, of that prep work in the days leading up to the party.

Clean the common areas. Guests likely won’t be spending time in every room of your house during the party. So when it comes time to clean, focus on the common areas where guests will be. Living rooms, dining areas and restrooms should garner the bulk of your attention when cleaning. If guests might be wandering outdoors, make sure leaves and dirt have been cleaned off of patios and decks.

Plan a playlist in advance. Expect to be busy on the day of the party, even if the party is catered or all the food prep was done long before the first guest arrived. Because you will be busy welcoming guests, you likely won’t have time to set the musical tone for the party, so do so in advance of the big day. If you want to stick to holiday music, many streaming apps offer various stations that play holiday music exclusively. Simply choose a station you like and then begin playing music when the first guest arrives.

Make a list of supplies and check it twice. About two weeks before the party, sit down and make a thorough list of everything you expect to need. Include food, beverages, dining needs (i.e., plates and silverware), and entertainment. A couple of weeks before the party, purchase items that won’t spoil, such as beverages like water, soda, wine, and beer and extra utensils if necessary. Doing so saves time during your grocery store trip the week of the party. Holiday hosts can take several steps in the days leading up to their parties to make hosting easier once guests arrive.
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.
Christmas tree tips and tricks

Christmas trees are an iconic symbol of the holiday season. Whether they are personal trees nestled in the corner of a living room for families to enjoy or towering evergreens serving as the focal point of a town square, Christmas trees are a wonder to behold.

Many people have fond memories of time spent around the Christmas tree sharing gifts and family traditions. Live trees and their pine-like aroma can be especially nostalgic trees to include in holiday plans. The National Christmas Tree Association says that approximately 25 to 30 million real Christmas trees are sold in the United States every year. North American trees hail from all 50 states and areas of Canada. While freshly cut trees can be particularly beautiful and aromatic additions to the season, they require a bit more work than artificial trees in order to remain beautiful and thrive throughout the holiday season. Maintenance can help keep Christmas trees as perfect as possible.

- **Even though it is tempting to buy a real tree as early as possible, their shelf life is limited even with the best care.** Durcal Christmas Tree Farm advises that, under the best conditions, a real tree should last up to four weeks before drying out.
- **Consider the needles when looking for a real tree.** Pull your hand toward your body along the branches. If many needles fall off, the tree is past its peak.
- **Think about the room in which the tree will be located.** Leave at least 6 inches between the tip of the tree and the ceiling, accounting for the height of the tree stand as well.
- **If needle retention is a goal, the Scotch pine variety has the best needle retention and a high survival rate, lending to its popularity, offers Precision Tree and Landscape.** Douglas fir and balsam fir are other durable trees.
- **If possible, buy a freshly cut tree from a reputable nursery or tree farm, advises The Old Farmer’s Almanac.** Many pre-cut trees sold elsewhere were likely cut weeks before and may not be fresh.
- **Cut the bottom of the tree trunk before bringing it home to facilitate the uptake of fresh water daily.** Trees can absorb as much as a gallon of water in a day, so make sure the tree gets fresh water every day.
- **Keep trees away from as many heat sources as possible and away from direct sunlight to prolong longevity.** According to Karabin Farms in Connecticut, to make a Christmas tree last longer, boil a gallon of water and then dissolve one cup of sugar in the water. Allow to cool. After freshly cutting the trunk, pour in the warm sugar water. Continue to add fresh, cool, plain water to the tree stand afterward. Once needles begin to fall off with frequency, the tree is reaching its prime. Remove it so it does not become a fire hazard.

Freshly cut Christmas trees are farmed specifically for the holiday season and support local economies. They also tend to last a bit longer than pre-cut trees available elsewhere.

Christmas tree recycling

When choosing a real Christmas tree for holiday celebrations, consumers should think about the many ways that trees can be repurposed after the holiday season. Some towns collect discarded trees to use them for various purposes. However, homeowners can get in on the action as well. The Old Farmer’s Almanac offers these great ideas for post-holiday tree use.

- **Prop up the tree near a bird feeder to provide another perch and shelter to birds that stick close to home in winter, such as chickadees and finches.**
- **String the tree with various treats for birds and put it in a sheltered location.** Ideas include homemade suet, cranberries and millet.
- **Mulch the tree and use it in the garden in the spring.**
- **Use boughs to insulate perennials in the garden.**
- **Keep some branches to use as kindling in a wood stove or fireplace, or as aromatic logs for next year’s yule fire.**
- **Sink an old tree in a personal pond.** Fish and tadpoles will live and lay eggs around this sheltered area.
- **Collect some pine needles and sew them into fabric packets to make scented sachets for closets or drawers.**

There are many imaginative ways to come up with handy uses for Christmas trees once the holiday season ends.
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