

Holiday Traditions



Decorate the Neighborhood

Are you actively involved in your church? Why not join (or start) a committee to decorate your building for Christmas?

Maybe you volunteer at a local soup kitchen or senior center? Those buildings also may need a little Christmas spirit. And you may be just the person to do it.

The best kind of holiday traditions are the ones that involve many people. So check in with your local organizations or leaders of faith to see if your help could be needed this Christmas season.

Be sure to gather up your friends, family members and fellow community members to make a difference in spreading holiday cheer.

GET INVOLVED

Great ideas always start with an individual or group looking to make a difference. If you have the initiative to begin your own decorating committee, there are only a few steps you need to take.

- Reach out to the organization you're looking to help.
- Find out if there is any red tape to starting a committee, such as securing approval from the board of directors.

- Draft a simple contract between you and the organization that states what each party will be responsible for providing, such as funds, decorations or equipment.

- Form your core group of volunteers and set milestone



© FOTOLIA

meetings to make sure all key projects get done on time.

- Spread the word.

KNOW YOUR SKILLSET

When forming a volunteer

committee to decorate your local church or community organization, it is important to know where you fit into the group dynamic.

Are you a natural leader who takes control of project planning and execution? Or are you better at taking direc-

tions and working individual-ly on specific tasks?

Do you have a creative side and natural knack for design? Or are your skillsets more in line with organizing meetings and reaching out to prospective volunteers?

All of these characteristics

are helpful in establishing and sustaining a successful volunteer group.

Knowing where you stand will help you realize what other kinds of personalities you should bring onboard to help your decorating team be a success.

Make Ornaments

Ornaments and holiday traditions go hand in hand. How many of your children's ornaments from when they were small still hang on your tree to this day?

Ornaments are sentimental in that they bring us down memory lane, helping us connect past holiday seasons with what was going on in our lives at that time.

The best ornaments can be funny, sweet or downright goofy — but they all have one thing in common: personalization. Including handmade or monogrammed ornaments on our Christmas trees helps remind us of the love we have for our friends and family members.

Don't have an ornament tradition in your home? Start one today. Make a pledge to your significant other to buy or make a special ornament every year.

You'll soon have a box full of meaningful treasures to open every Christmas season when the time comes to decorate your tree.

CRAFTY ORNAMENTS

On the other hand, nothing says ornaments need to last from season to season. By incorporating live items such as leaves, tree branches or flowers, you can build ornaments inspired by Mother Nature.

You also can incorporate fresh fruits such as cranberries or twisted orange peels

into your ornament decoration to enhance your tree's scent. Popcorn strings and elegant fabrics can be combined to form a beautiful ornament, as can small photos of family members and handmade frames.

Get creative in your orna-

ment experiments to make memories that last a lifetime.

INCLUDE THE KIDS

Your children will likely bring home handcrafted ornaments throughout the years. Hang them proudly.

Take it a step further by prompting your kids to make similar creations to decorate at home.

Plan an afternoon of ornament-making that involves Christmas caroling, special treats and hot chocolate to make the experience a fun one.

Once your children's ornaments are finished, ask them to hang them on the tree. Involving them in the decorating process will help them take pride in their creations, and may even convince them to become more creative in other areas of everyday life.



© FOTOLIA

Pay it Forward

Gifts and financial donations are certainly welcome this time of year by your local organizations and charitable non-profits. But your time may be the most valuable contribution you can make.

If you're feeling fortunate to be where you are in life this holiday season, why not pay forward a little of yourself? You might just make a difference that people will remember for the rest of their lives.

Studies have shown that more volunteering is needed around the country, especially around the holidays.

Only about one quarter of the American population volunteers through or for an organization, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. This statistic has remained largely unchanged over the years, underscoring the need for more volunteers to make themselves available for charitable organizations.

Seek out one of the organizations listed below and get started on impacting your community in a positive way.

#GIVINGTUESDAY

With so much attention devoted to Black Friday, Small Business Saturday and Cyber Monday, new focus is being paid to Tuesday. #GivingTuesday, that is.

The movement was founded in 2012 by New York's 92nd Street Y in partnership with the United Nations Foundation. Together, with a team of celebrity influencers and founding partners, the groups launched the #GivingTuesday global initiative that has engaged more than 10,000 organizations worldwide.

Check out the website www.givingtuesday.org to find participating organizations in your area and for ways to get involved.

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

There are many military-focused groups and organizations looking for volunteers this time of year. You can check with your local veterans' associations to help provide volunteer hours during a holiday event.

You also can find volunteer opportunities at your local hospital or nursing home — any kind of facility where people may be spending time away from their home during the holidays due to physical issues.

Many hospitals and nursing homes schedule holiday dances, meals and even trips from Santa Claus for kids in children's hospitals. All of these efforts require a strong force of volunteers to aid in planning and coordinating.

Contact the auxiliary arm of your local hospital to find out their needs and how you can meet them.



Cook Something New

Traditions are by definition stable and unchanged activities that serve as pillars of special occasions. But that doesn't mean creativity can't come into play.

Cooking is one of the most instrumental parts of any holiday celebration. Some families stick to the same ham, potatoes and dessert recipes for decades.

But why not mix it up a bit?

This year — and every year from now on — add a new recipe to your repertoire. You might just find something that you enjoy cooking throughout the year.

KEEP IT SIMPLE — AT FIRST

Maybe you're intimidated to try out a new recipe with so many guests coming to your home. That's OK. Besides trying it out weeks ahead of time, one tip is to keep the dish as simple as possible.

Once you become more practiced in various cooking techniques and unique ingredients, you should feel confident enough to test the waters and try complex dishes. Until then, remember that oftentimes during the holidays, simplicity wins out when it comes to our favorite recipes.

CONSIDER YOUR GUESTS

Can you see Uncle Dave sitting down to a fancy French-inspired dish with a smile on his face? Consider who you're serving when trying to come up with your new menu item.

If your friends and family look forward to your special potato casserole every year, don't try replacing it now with something more unique. Think about what might complement your most popular dishes and build your menu from there.

DO SOME RESEARCH

Equally as fun as the actual cooking is the research that goes into finding the perfect recipe. Scour old cookbooks to look up variations of all types of meals ranging from traditional holiday roasts to vegan options.

Find one recipe that everyone agrees on, copy it down and head to the store. While there, you may be inspired to add other ingredients or even another entire dish to your plan. This type of creative chef work may become your favorite part of your new tradition.



Scavenger Hunt for Gifts

Why not combine classic American traditions from Christmas and Easter during the holiday season?

The Easter egg hunt is a classic staple of Easter. Children enjoy the anticipation of finding — and eating — their Easter treats while adults have fun thinking back to their own childhoods participating in their own hunts.

Consider starting a new Christmas tradition that involves sending your children on a search for their presents.

Here's how:

HIDE THE PRESENTS

If Christmas morning is your dedicated time to open presents with your children, set aside a few to hide for your scavenger hunt. You also can hold a hunt for smaller items such as candies, gag gifts or Christmas cards.

Whatever you choose to hide, spread them throughout your house to make the chase more exciting.

CREATE YOUR CLUES

Depending on the age of your children, think of clues that will challenge them to think. Using riddles or rhymes is a great way to make younger kids use their brainpower, while older children may be

more challenged by more complicated brain puzzles.

Write down your clues on gift tags to infuse a bit more holiday spirit into your scavenger hunt. You also can tie a candy cane onto each clue as

mini gifts before your children uncover the main present.

GET IT ON CAMERA

You're putting a lot of work into this scavenger hunt, so

make it a memory that lasts forever by following your children on their journey with your camera.

Make sure your digital camera or camcorder is charged the night before to capture

their surprise when they finally make it to their gift at the end of the hunt.

Play the video on your TV next Christmas ahead of the scavenger hunt as part of your new tradition.



© FOTOLIA

Movie Night

Many people have turned going to the theater into a Christmas Day tradition. Hollywood has taken notice, holding many major blockbusters for around the holiday season.

But if you aren't excited about any of this year's releases, why not host a holiday movie night from the comfort of your own home? From the Griswolds to Charlie Brown and his friends, we all have our favorite Christmas movie characters.

Enjoying the classic holiday films of our time is a great way to spend time together with friends and family members.

Here's how to throw an amazing holiday movie party that will surely turn into an annual event:

STEP 1: THE MOVIES

You can't have a memorable holiday movie party without great holiday movies. Plan to play two to three movies during your get-together. If guests can't stay for that long, choose one.

Poll your guests ahead of the party to gauge their interests in film options. Are they in the mood for slapstick holiday humor or a sentimental tear-jerker. Keep the movie list a surprise.

Keep you guests waiting in anticipation until you hit play and watch their faces as they start quoting their favorite parts before the movie even starts.



STEP 2. THE FOOD

Popcorn and soda are the traditional snack options for a movie, but why not get fancy with your menu? Treating your guests to more substantial treats, such as grilled steak tips or chicken wings,

will help satisfy their cravings while they take in the flick.

You also can go with more of a potluck style, asking guests to bring along their favorite appetizers and drinks. Just make sure you plan accordingly with the amount of food needed for the number of guests.

STEP 3. THE TRIVIA

Every great holiday movie has great trivia associated with it. Consider turning your viewing party into a game of sorts, full of pauses to answer questions about upcoming scenes or about factual tidbits on the movie's star actor.

Divvy up your guests into teams and have them battle it out for a prize. Add a scoreboard on a dry-erase board to keep track of points.

Your friends and family members will admire your creativity, and your holiday movie party will become a must-attend for years to come.

Get Outside

One way to start a tradition while also getting some exercise is planning an outdoor adventure — even a simple one in your own backyard.

Playing outside is a great idea for all ages around the holidays. Kids need to run off energy, and adults need to run off the extra cookies they've consumed.

Even if the weather is cold around Christmastime in your neck of the woods, there are plenty of ways you and yours can enjoy the great outdoors.

GO SKATING

If you are fortunate enough to live in an area that features places to ice skate, you can enjoy one of the true outdoor treasures of the cold weather season. Ice skating is one of the most popular holiday activities because it can be enjoyed by all ages.

Local skating rinks are a great place to strap on the skates because they provide safe, supervised skating areas. Make sure to be fitted for skates before heading out on the ice to make sure you're getting enough ankle support.

MAKE IT A GAME

Staring an annual football or ice hockey game on Christmas Day is a great way to combine family fun with a little healthy competition. If you have a large holiday party every year, you should have plenty of available players for your game.

Whatever activity you decide to make into a tradition, it can be fun to make it competitive event. Keeping score every Christmas can establish bragging rights for the rest of the year. This will help strengthen the tradition and make it one that everyone looks forward to each holiday season.

KEEP IT SAFE

The key to enjoying the outdoors during the colder weather is safety. Follow these tips from the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons to prevent injuries while enjoying the most common winter-time activities:

- Adults should always supervise children during any outdoor activity.
- Children should always wear helmets when sledding, skiing, skating or snowboarding.
- Never go down a hill headfirst; always sit facing forward and steer.
- If you're playing in the evening, make sure the area is well lit and away from roadways.

