

HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS



Keeping Things Straight

HOW TO HANG CHRISTMAS LIGHTS EVENLY ON YOUR HOME

Hanging Christmas lights is a tradition in which most American neighborhoods participate. Red, green, blue and white lights are common colors that illuminate homes.

This tradition makes the darker days around the winter solstice seem a little more cheerful, but getting the lights just right isn't always easy. Lights that aren't hung properly will droop, sag and can eventually fall down.

Here are some tips on getting them straight:

LOTS OF CLIPS

Start by using a light clip for every individual bulb in your light strand. This may seem excessive, but it is the key to straight lights.

Attach the clips as you are hanging the lights so you know where to position them. If you own your home, you might think about using permanent clips to make the process easier next year.

Hang the clips using a gutter or other plumb line as a gauge. Clip the lights in position as you work. If you have a friend available, have them feed you the strand of lights as you work to make the process easier.

For rope lighting, use the tracks that are available. These are plastic tracks that the rope squeezes into. Attach the track in position first, using silicone glue, nails or screws (pre-drill first) and then



© FOTOLIA / AP

press the rope into the track. It is impossible not to have a straight rope light if you use the tracks. The tracks are clear and subtle so you can leave them in place all year.

TREE TIPS

Decorate your trees by wrapping mini lights around

the trunk and the branches. Start at the bottom and wrap the light strand around the trunk in even increments. Branch out as necessary, wrapping around each main branch and doubling the lighting on your way back.

Use cable ties to hold the lighting in place if needed. Use about 100 mini lights per

foot of tree.

BE CAREFUL

Use caution when hanging your lights. A sturdy, quality ladder with adjustable feet and good traction is ideal. Have someone assist you when you are on the ladder to prevent an accident.

Don't hang lights when you are alone in case you slip and fall. If conditions are poor, avoid hanging the lights. You can also decorate from the inside, using bright bulbs in the window. You won't get quite the same effect, but it is safer than climbing on an icy roof in poor weather.

Holiday Crafts for Children

If you want a fun activity to keep your children occupied during the busy holiday season, these easy Christmas crafts for kids are the perfect solution.

Fortunately, the materials used for the following crafts are readily available and inexpensive. You may even already have them on hand.

CHENILLE CANDY CANES

Chenille stems are cheap and easy to use, making them the perfect material for crafting candy cane decorations.

All you need are red and white chenille stems, decorative ribbon and a pair of scissors.

Cut two chenille stems to equal length — one red, one white — and twist the stems together, working towards the bottom. Secure the candy cane by twisting the bottom end together, and then add a colorful ribbon for the finishing touch.

Your children will love making these fun candy cane crafts, which can be used as ornaments, gift accents or anything else your imagination conjures up.

CHRISTMAS WREATH

This fun and unique Christmas wreath uses materials you likely have on hand, making it an inexpensive way to decorate your home for the holidays.

You'll need a wire clothes hanger, scissors, fabric scraps and ribbon. Stretch the clothes hanger into the shape of a rounded diamond, and cut your fabric scraps to equal length, measuring approximately

six inches long.

Let your children tie the fabric strips onto the hanger, continuing until the hanger is completely covered. Finish the wreath by tying decorative ribbon into a bow and placing at the top of the wreath.

Now, your children can hang the wreath anywhere they like.

CRAFT STICK REINDEER

Whether used for ornaments or as cute decorations for the mantle, these craft stick reindeer are perfect for children to make.

You'll need a package of wooden craft sticks, glue, small pom-poms, googly eyes, a brown marker and string.

To make these crafts, have your kids color three wooden craft sticks with the brown marker. Then, place the wooden craft sticks into a triangle formation and glue together. Add a pom-pom for the nose and glue the googly eyes in place. Help your child tie string to the top of the reindeer to finish it off.

These fun and easy Christmas crafts for kids are simple, inexpensive and perfect for holiday decorating. Plus, they're simple enough for your children to give as gifts to other friends and family members.

Remember to supervise very young children, but above all else make sure to have plenty of fun.



How to Make Plum Pudding

Round, thick, sweet and delicious, traditional plum pudding has, for centuries, been the holly-draped centerpiece of every English yuletide.

Why not start your own family holiday tradition and make a plum pudding yourself, just like the British do? Here's how.

Make your preparations as early as possible — at least two weeks and up to a month before you plan to present it. Plum pudding tastes better with age, believe it or not.

STEP 1

6 candied and sliced pineapple rings
1 lb. whole candied cherries
1 lb. raisins, dark and golden mixed
1 lb. dates, pitted and chopped
1 cup chopped citron
1/2 cup each chopped, candied orange and lemon peel

Put the prepared fruit into a large bowl.

STEP 2

2 cups sifted flour
1/2 cup white sugar
2 teaspoons cinnamon
1-1/2 teaspoons baking soda
1 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon allspice
1/2 teaspoon cloves

Sprinkle 1/2 cup of the flour over the fruit and set

aside. In a second bowl, sift the rest of the flour together with the soda, salt and spices, and set aside.

STEP 3

3 eggs
Juice of one lemon
1-3/4 cups buttermilk
1/2 cup oil
1/4 cup orange juice

1/4 cup brandy

Beat the eggs. Then add the buttermilk and remaining ingredients to the egg mixture, and mix together well. Now blend the liquid mixture with the flour mixture until it forms a batter.

Pour the batter into the large bowl containing your

fruit. Use a wooden spoon to stir and mix well, making sure the fruit is well-covered with batter.

If you've got pudding molds, great! But you can also use coffee cans or any other molds, large or small, up to about one-pound size. Grease them well first, then pour the mixture into each until they're

about 3/4 full.

STEAMING

Cover each one securely with foil, and place in a pot or steamer. Steam in any covered pot or canner, allowing the water to rise to no more than halfway up the filled tins.

Steam your puddings in consistently heated water for at least four hours. Check a tin periodically to note when the steaming is complete, when the dessert no longer appears creamy.

When your plum pudding is steamed, remove it to a counter or dry shelf and let it cool for about 30 minutes.

While the puddings are cooling, cut up cheesecloth pieces amply enough to securely wrap around the individual puddings, and soak each cloth in brandy.

Carefully remove each cooled pudding from its mold. Wrap each pudding in a cheesecloth. Overwrap each packet in aluminum foil, then set them to mature in a corner of your refrigerator for two weeks to a month.

When you're ready to serve, steam each pudding again for about an hour.



© FOTOLIA / AP

Get the Professional Look

HOW TO DECORATE YOUR HOME LIKE A STYLIST

The pages of glossy home magazines are full of photos of wonderful Christmas decor this time of the year.

Wouldn't you just love to find out how the stylist achieved such amazing results? What are his or her secrets? How can you achieve the same look?

Here are the secrets to accomplishing a gorgeous, and yet affordable, look for your home this Christmas.

PLAN LIKE A PROFESSIONAL

How do you decorate your home for Christmas? Do you get the box with decorations from the attic, buy a Christmas tree at the local lot, and then just hang everything from the box on the tree?

Maybe you have some ornaments left over, so you decide to decorate some loose Christmas branches to make a lovely centerpiece for the dinner table. You're done!

If only it was that easy.

No, when a stylist wants to create a wonderful Christmas atmosphere, he or she will make the necessary preparations in the form of a plan.

First of all, a decision is made on a style or theme: elegant baroque, simple family Christmas, or ultra-modern. Then the stylist looks at the surroundings.

What is the main material used in this house? What are the predominant colors? Which style does this house project? How can you use this with your chosen theme? Is there anything that needs hiding?



© FOTOLIA / AP

Then it is time to make a shopping list of things that you need to create your chosen theme and to hide any unsightly elements.

STYLING TRICKS

Styling a home for Christmas is done in exactly the same way as a regular styling job: by using layers.

The stylist starts off with the basic layer, which is the house itself. Color — by using fabric or paint — and

shape — for example, large backdrops or pieces of furniture — are added to set the tone.

Next is the second layer: the Christmas tree. You can also add other Christmas plants to this layer. For example, you can use two large poinsettias as centerpieces on the dinner table, or pair up small evergreen plants.

The natural green of the plants acts as a base on which to offset the glitter and glamor of the Christmas decora-

tion. This is a much-used styling trick.

Decoration belongs to the third layer: the layer that adds bells and whistles. Decoration is not restricted to the classic Christmas bauble.

Nothing beats candles and tea lights when it comes to creating an atmosphere. Limit the number of different colors — and scents — that you use and place the candles in rhythmic, repetitive arrangements for a stylish touch.

Salt Dough Ornaments

A SIMPLE, CLASSIC, CHILD-FRIENDLY WAY TO DECORATE

Making your own Christmas ornaments may seem like an arduous task, but it doesn't have to be any harder than making Christmas cookies. Use salt dough to create shapes that you can hang on your tree that will last for years.

RECIPE

Start by mixing the salt dough. The basic recipe is for equal parts salt and water. Then add an equivalent amount of white flour. For example, if you add one cup of salt and one of cup water, you'll mix it with two cups of flour. It's an easy ratio that you won't even have to look up after you've made a few batches.

You can vary the recipe by adding a few drops of food coloring or darkening it with tea or coffee instead of water. Cinnamon, nutmeg or a few drops of essential oils makes the dough scented. This scent lasts a surprising amount of time – up to several years.

Set your oven between 200 and 300 degrees Fahrenheit. Then, start mixing your dough. Add all the ingredients together and stir it until it's too stiff to stir with a spoon.

Knead it by hand until it's smooth and pliable. Roll the dough out on a floured surface, or on a sheet of wax paper, until it is ¼ inch thick.

SHAPES

Use cookie cutters to cut out your ornaments. If you have a steady hand and creative mind, you can cut them into your own designs using a

knife with a smooth, sharp blade. Lay the ornaments on a non-stick cookie sheet.

For handprints, roll the dough to 1/2-inch thickness and press your child's hand or foot into the dough. You can

carve their name and the date into the dough using a toothpick or small knife, or you can write it on with a pen later.

Poke a hole in the ornaments using tool, such as a pen, straw, chopstick or skew-

er. Use two holes at the top if you want to hang the ornament so it's flat.

Put the baking sheet in the oven and bake for 1 ½ to 4 hours. If your oven is set at 200 and the ornaments are thick, it'll take up to four hours. However, if the ornaments are thin it takes around 1 ½ hours. Use a lower temperature if you can't check the ornaments frequently. The dough is ready when it's hard but not burning. Let the dough cool before you proceed.

You can use many methods to decorate the ornaments. They are porous and accept many paints and pens. Glitter glue, acrylic paint, colored permanent markers and glitter all work. You can even glue items, like googly-eyes and beads to the ornaments.

Leave the paint and glue to dry. Then, seal the ornaments with polyurethane varnish that you can find at craft and hardware stores. Apply two to four coats in a well-ventilated area. This final coating makes the ornaments last for years.



© FOTOLIA / AP

Celebrating the Five Senses

“**D**o you hear what I hear...?” As you prepare for this Christmas, be mindful of each of the five senses. Here are ways to make the holidays a sensation.

HEARING

— Find a CD with holiday songs that you enjoy, or order them a la carte off a program like iTunes. Play the holiday music as you are decorating, or after work for a transition into the evenings at home.

— Attend a bell-ringing service or a “Messiah” performance.

— Attach jingle bells to each end of several ribbons. Tie them altogether in the middle and hang it over your rearview mirror like a pair of fuzzy dice.

SIGHT

— Take the time to take a drive through or walk through a neighborhood or holiday display to look at Christmas lights. Attend a lighting ceremony, if there is one in your area, and watch hundreds of thousands of lights come aglow all at once.

— The clear night skies of winter reveal more stars to the naked eye than at other times of the year. Ponder what the shepherds and the magi must have seen so long ago.

— Gather the family together to watch your favorite Christmas movies. Perhaps you could plan one for each



© FOTOLIA / AP

Saturday evening in December.

TASTE

— Have some homemade eggnog or pumpkin pie. It is, after all, only once a year.

— Sip homemade hot cocoa and add a few marshmallows, or add a few sprin-

kles of cinnamon to your morning coffee.

— Experience a Danish holiday smorgasbord complete with stuffed pork loin and frikadeller, or eat a delicious meal at a local restaurant.

TOUCH

— Although you would by

vet, wool, fleece and satin.

— Go ice-skating. The weight of your body and the elevation of your feet feel different while ice-skating than while you are in your regular shoes. If you are not used to ice-skating, you might feel a few bumps and bruises, too, but you will make wonderful memories.

SMELL

— If allergies permit, bring pine needles and pine cones into your home and fill bowls or baskets with them for a fragrance that speaks of winter and the holidays.

— If baking cookies does not appeal to you, a wide array of candles with delicious scents, such as apple pie and sugar cookie, can be found during the Christmas season.

— Make your own apple cider. If you love the smell but not the taste, fill your home with the same scents by filling a pot of steaming water on your stove with vanilla extract, whole cloves, orange slices, allspice, nutmeg, ginger, and cinnamon, or any combination of those, and letting it simmer on the lowest setting for hours. Add water as needed.

no means want to touch a roaring fire, you can certainly feel the warmth of wine as you sit beside it. Note the heaviness and solidity of the logs as you stack them.

— The fabrics used around the winter holidays are often cozier and more decadent than at other times of years. Run your hands along the vel-

Holiday Wrappings

IDEAS THAT GO BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL PAPER AND BOWS

With all the work that goes into trimming the holiday tree and decorating the house, it's only fitting that the gifts under the tree share in the holiday glitz.

Perfectly wrapped packages don't have to come from expert department store wrappers either! The following tips can help transform your gifts into presents that are almost too pretty to open. These special holiday wrappings will add the final touch to your holiday décor.

HISTORIC

If you love vintage decorating styles, consider using vintage wrapping paper to wrap your holiday gifts. Online auction sites offer a plethora of vintage papers.

Vintage Christmas wrapping paper from the 1950s is a great way to package holiday gifts. Reproduction wrapping paper, from the Victorian period for example, is also available in stores. Using an older wrapping style will make your gifts stand out and show the extra effort you put into your gift-giving.

SIMPLICITY

You can also opt for simple brown paper to wrap your presents. Brown paper makes a great canvas. Try stamping images of reindeer or evergreen trees throughout.

You might also decorate the brown packages with paper snowflakes or glued-on gold and silver buttons. Brown paper is typically much cheaper than thematic wrapping paper, so if you have a lot of gifts, it might be a practical route to consider.

FABRIC

You can also wrap your presents without using any paper. A trip to the fabric store will reveal a wide array of alternate considerations for decorating your presents.

Consider buying several yards of red and green tulle. If



© FOTOLIA / AP

you amass your materials during sales, you might wind up spending the same amount as you would on regular wrapping paper. Wrapping your presents with ribbon-tied tulle or organza is an elegant way to greet Christmas morning.

The fabric store is also filled with holiday material that can be transformed into functional items. Make a holiday tablecloth and use it to wrap up a special present. In this way your wrapping actually doubles as an added gift.

Make someone an elegant silver cape and use it to wrap a gift as well. Additionally, fabric stores will offer a wide array of ribbons and other beautiful baubles like beads and sequins that can be used to create enchanting Christmas wrappings. Silk flowers can be weaved to make fantastic bows.

POSTCARDS

Finally, you can find vintage Christmas postcards that make superb gift tags. These symbols of a bygone age will remind your gift recipients that they are special—so special that you went out of your way to take care with these memorable wrappings.

Remember to think outside the box when you wrap up those piles of presents this holiday season. Your gifts can be transformed with simple and effective artistry using these alternative wrapping suggestions.