

A lit red candle is the central focus on the left side of the image. The flame is bright yellow and orange. In the background, a Christmas tree is visible with green needles and several out-of-focus red lights. A red gift tag is partially visible in the bottom right corner. The overall scene is warm and festive.

Holiday

ENTERTAINING

Give your home the
WARMTH
of Christmas

Choosing a Christmas Tree

HOW TO PICK THE PERFECT HOLIDAY CENTERPIECE FOR YOUR HOME

For many people, nothing brings back holiday memories like the look and smell of a real tree.

Fresh Christmas trees are an affordable, attractive option for your home, but you need to know what to look for before you head to the Christmas tree lot or drive to a farm to cut one yourself.

Here are some things to consider.

Different trees may dry out quicker than others, for example, or be harder to decorate. Some make bigger messes than others when the needles fall off.

In general, though, most trees for sale today will have a good combination of appearance and longevity.

DECIDE WHERE TO PLACE IT

Before you leave to buy a tree, make sure you know the exact place in your home where you plan to put it. Measure both the height and width of the space ahead of time.

While most sellers will have the trees organized according to size, you should still bring your own tape measure and make sure the tree will fit your home's dimensions.

TREE QUALITY

If you know what variety of tree you want, go ahead and buy it. If not, you'll need to do a little research to see the pluses and minuses of each species of tree available in your area.

CHECK THEM CLOSELY

If possible, it's best to cut your own tree from a Christmas tree farm so you know it's as fresh as it can possibly be.

If you buy a tree from a lot, ask the seller about how fresh their trees are and when the next shipment will be coming in. You should get the freshest tree you can to make sure it stays beautiful through the entire holiday season.

Run your fingers through the branches to see how easily the needles fall off. If they fall off en masse so the branch starts to look bald, the tree has been too stressed or is too dry. The needles should seem firmly



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attached.

You can also bend a small twig to see how pliable it feels. If the branches are fresh and still filled with moisture, they'll bend easily without breaking. If the branch snaps when you try to bend it, you know it's too dry.

GET ADVICE

Good tree retailers will know a lot about their products. If you're not sure which one to pick ask about which varieties perform best in your climate.

You should also ask about

how to dispose of the tree after Christmas. Some communities have tree recycling programs; others will pick up trees from the curbside on a set schedule. Your tree seller will probably know all about the options, so ask them up front.

Get Children Involved

CHRISTMAS MEMORIES ARE BETTER WITH KIDS IN THE KITCHEN

Christmas is all about childhood memories, so it's a great time to bring kids into the kitchen to create some.

What were some of your favorite things to do in the kitchen when you were a child? Think back to your own memories growing up, and try to bring those same pleasant experiences to your own family this year.

PASS DOWN TRADITIONS

Most families have their own holiday treat recipes that have been passed down for generations. Getting children involved can help them learn these same traditions and remember where they came from.

The taste of Grandma's Christmas goodies is something they'll cherish after they're grown. Memories of actually baking those treats with Grandma could be cherished even more.

ASK FOR INPUT

Before the holiday season begins, talk over your plans with your children and see what they'd like to add. When kids get a chance to have input on what you're doing, they're more likely to enjoy it and get excited about the process.

Ask them how much food they think you should make and who you should give it to. Letting them pick some of their friends' families to get

Christmas treats is a good way to teach young children the spirit of generosity.

WASH UP

Use the holidays to teach your children how to prepare to cook. Younger children, especially, can enjoy getting involved in preparing the kitchen and washing their hands before they start to make foods.

INGREDIENT DUMPING

Choose recipes that involve measuring ingredients that are easy for children to dump into mixing bowls. Let each child take turns pouring things like sugar and flour into a bowl so they feel like they're really participating in the Christmas baking process.

When the food comes out of the oven, they'll know they played a part in how delicious it tastes. Be sure to remind them that their help is part of the reason it tastes so good.

CREATIVITY

Decorating foods such as sugar cookies can help your child use their imagination. Using unconventional foods like licorice and colorful candies to decorate their cookies gives them the freedom to make their own



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baked artwork.

One fun thing to do is simply provide the decorating tools and let the children make their own decisions about how to decorate their own treats. You never know what they might come up with: a Christmas dinosaur on a cookie, or ice princesses on a cake. Whatever they make, take pictures so you can remember the fun after your children are grown.

FORGIVING BY DESIGN

You should choose recipes that

don't require looking perfect so that when children bake with you, you won't have to nitpick their work.

When food needs to look perfect, one good idea is making two batches: one for the kids to help create and eat, and the other to look prettier for your guests.

That way children can have fun and actually bake their own treats — which is both a good way to make memories and teach them about cooking at the same time — without worrying about presentation.

Planning the Perfect Party

GET A HEAD START ON YOUR HOLIDAY ENTERTAINING

One of the best parts of the Christmas season is the chance to spend time with friends and family. What better way to do that than by throwing a great holiday party?

There are plenty of parties during the season, though, and you'll want yours to stand out without adding too much stress to a busy time of year. By planning ahead and following these tips, you can give your guests a great experience and create lasting Christmas memories.

THEME IDEAS

Picking a theme for your party isn't easy, but it will generally fall into a few popular categories. Here are some ideas.

The national theme: You might serve Mexican food and use south-of-the-border decor for a "Feliz Navidad" party, or look to Europe for inspiration with a Swedish or German theme. Picking a country makes planning the party easier because you can match the decorations, the food and the music in a cohesive way.

The hobby theme: Whatever your interests are, you can find a way to weave them into your party. If you're

a huge football fan, for example, you could throw a gridiron Christmas party that's decorated in your team's colors. You could throw a scrapbooking party where guests take pictures and design simple pages as part of the fun. The possibilities are endless.

The decade theme: Every decade has its own unique style and music. Whether you throw a disco Christmas party in honor of the '70s, a rock-n-roll '50s party or one with a roaring '20s theme, complete with flappers and dancing the Charleston, the choice is up to you.

INVITATIONS

Plan to send your invitations at least three weeks in advance to give your guests enough time to sort out their calendars.

You also want to set the right tone with your invitations. They're the first impression people will have of your party, after all, so their quality

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and presentation should match the image you're trying to project.

Think about the overall mood you want to achieve before you start picking specific things like color schemes. Whether you want a formal, traditional dinner party or a more informal and hip get-together, you should make your invitations set the stage.

Be specific, too. Tell your guests when the party will begin, when it will end and a short description of what food you'll be serving. Otherwise, your guests might come expecting a full meal when you're only planning light hors d'oeuvre.

Finally, make sure you include directions with the invitation.

YOUR MENU

To reduce stress, it's important you look for dishes that you can prepare well ahead of time. Foods that can be frozen or refrigerated are ideal, along with baked goods that keep well at room temperature.

For items that need to be made fresh, do as much preparation work ahead of time as possible. You may be able to mix together all the basic ingredients days before the party, then simply pour them in a pan and bake them at the last minute.

Another way to save stress is to think about what utensils will be required to serve each dish. The more finger foods and small snacks you can serve with toothpicks, the fewer dishes you'll have to wash later.

Finally, remember to focus on tried-and-true recipes that you know your guests will enjoy. Parties are not the time to experiment with new cooking ideas that might not turn out like you planned.

THE LAYOUT

When setting up your home for the party, the most important thing to consider is the traffic pattern for your guests.

Visitors will need plenty of room

to move around. You might need to move your furniture to the walls or place them into small groups for better conversation.

Also consider the traffic flow when you decide where to place the food. If you have a bar, it would be smart to position it close to the water and ice. Snacks and finger foods should be positioned in several convenient places throughout the room so that guests can mingle.

You should also pay close attention to seating. A good rule of thumb is to make sure you have enough seats so that half your guests can be seated at the same time. That means if your home has seating for 15 people, you should invite no more than 30. If you want a bigger crowd, you'll have to bring in extra chairs.

THE ATMOSPHERE

Unless you're a party-planning diva, it's best to stick with the traditional, time-tested ways of setting a holiday mood.

You'll want to light candles just before your guests arrive, dim your lights and play some holiday music. One easy way to do that is by streaming the music from your smartphone or computer.

There are plenty of online sources, including Spotify and Pandora, that let you play holiday tunes to fit a specific theme — say, country Christmas music or rock-n-roll Christmas music, in addition to the traditional favorites.

IMAGINE PERFECTION

Most of all, you should know what your perfect party looks like ahead of time. Have a vision for what you want it to be, then get an early start to make your dream become a reality.

When you close your eyes and imagine the perfect party, what do you see? Whatever it is, write down what it should include and make a plan for how to get there.

Setting An Elegant Table

HOW TO CREATE THE PERFECT SPREAD FOR YOUR GUESTS

When your guests arrive for a holiday dinner party, what will they see? If you're smart, they'll feast their eyes on a perfectly prepared, elegant table that makes them feel welcome.

To leave a good first impression, your table should be perfect before guests arrive. Every piece of silverware, every napkin and every plate — not to mention the centerpieces and other accessories — should scream “wow.”

But how can you get to that point? Here are some tips.

SET A FOUNDATION

A tablecloth and placemat will serve as the base on which you'll build the entire table design. The color, proportion and texture of the base will be crucial to achieving the look you want, so pick carefully.

Think of the placemat as your backdrop. Guests will be paying attention to what's in the foreground — the dishes and decor — but the background is always there, working silently to set the mood.

You can also consider using a charger either in addition to or in place of the placemat.

MIX AND MATCH

One big trend for holiday tables this year is mixing different types of china. The days of sticking with one set are over, at least for now.

Many people have a set of vintage china passed down from their parents and grandparents along with a set of newer china that has a

more modern feel. Don't be afraid to mix the two styles on the table for a more sophisticated, trendy setup.

OUTSIDE IN

When it comes time to place the silverware, remember one simple rule: outside in.

Forks go on the left side of the plate, and spoons and knives go on the right side. The silverware that is used first should go on the outside. Think about the order in which your silverware will be used, and work from the outside in.

For the napkins, don't even think about using paper. A classy dinner will always include cloth napkins, neatly pressed and folded to the left of the plate.

A PERSONAL TOUCH

Finally, to truly wow your guests, leave a personalized place card on each table. The layout and colors should match your party's theme, and their name should be displayed in an elegant, understated way.

You can even leave a small gift on each plate if you'd like. The point is to go above and beyond your guests' expectations to create a sophisticated dinner that they'll savor and remember.



Create a Cookie Exchange

YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS CAN HAVE A BAKING BONANZA

If you want an easy way to create a huge variety of holiday treats to share this year, consider starting a cookie exchange. Haven't heard of a cookie exchange? Well, the idea is simple.

You and your friends will each bake a set number of cookies, usually a dozen cookies per person. If there are 10 people in your cookie exchange, then you'll pick your favorite cookie recipe and bake a whopping 120 of them.

Each friend will get a dozen of your cookies — and you'll get a dozen of theirs, as well — to create a huge collection of flavors that you can share with others and use in your holiday entertaining.

SET SOME RULES

It's a good idea to set some rules at the outset. If you slave over your grandma's secret recipe for hours on end, while another friend bakes a pile of pre-made dough she bought at the grocery store, you're not going to be happy.

The rules themselves don't matter. If you want all store-bought cookies, or all homemade cookies, or all sugar cookies, the cookie exchange will still work fine. You and your friends just need to know the ground rules before you hit the kitchen.

Make sure you talk with everyone in the group about what types of cookies they're baking. If nine of the 10 are baking sugar cookies, you'll need to regroup to get more variety.

MAKE SPACE

Since you're going to be baking lots and lots of cookies, plan ahead. Make



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sure all your cookie pans are clean and your table — and probably lots of countertop space, too — is completely cleared so you'll have room for the plethora of cooling cookies.

You can make it a family event, too. Call in your spouse and children to join in the project. Who knows? The cookie exchange could become one of your family's favorite holiday memories.

MAKE IT AN EVENT

You and your friends should mark a date to do the actual cookie exchange itself. All the friends will gather at a set time and share their cookie bounty with everyone else — and taste a few of the results, too.

You can make the cookie exchange one of your holiday parties, letting all the bakers get together to share what they did and go home with a mountain of tasty treats.

If you do it right, you'll have a whole variety of cookies that you can use throughout the holidays — and have a lot of fun at the same time.

Retro is In

LOOK TO '60s FOR INSPIRATION

There's an element of holiday decorating that's always about nostalgia.

Pulling out the Christmas ornaments from your childhood, taking part in the same traditions each year and remembering the holidays from your youth are all part of the season.

In decorating, one of today's hottest trends taps into that nostalgia in a big way: the retro look.

Retro style is popular this year as a way to not only bring back those pleasant holiday memories but also add a modern twist to them.

FUNKY, FRESH

When people talk about retro decorating today, they don't mean stuffy Victorian-style Christmas decorations — although that's fine for some people.

Today's retro is more inspired by the lines and colors of the 1960s. Imagine a swinging cocktail party with olive greens and deep reds, preferably with a touch of Danish modern simplicity.

ALL ABOUT THE TREE

One of the hottest trends this year is taking that cheesy symbol of 1960s Christmas — the artificial tree — and giving it a pop of modern color.

A popular combination is an all-white artificial tree with lavender accents. It brings a touch of that wonderful retro style with a

pleasant, up-to-date color as an accent.

You can also look for vintage ornaments and decorations to complete the look. Try to find the same space-age inspiration that was so popular in the '60s, such as metallic poinsettias and super-shiny ornaments, paired with the oh-so-modern simplicity of sleek white accessories.

BLEND SOME OF TODAY'S STYLE

The great thing about retro decorating is that it can mix in just about any style if arranged tastefully.

Just because your family's favorite nativity arrangement doesn't match the mid-century modern look doesn't mean you have to abandon it completely.

In fact, since Christmas has always been about incorporating old traditions into today's world, it's a good idea to try to include some of your family's favorite items, even mis-matched ones, into your decor. You can make it look whimsical and funky with a little creativity.

Try to include glittering snow, for example, or shiny tinsel among your favorite Christmas items to get them to blend in with the retro theme you're aiming for.

