

HOLIDAY TRADITIONS



Choose the Perfect Tree

Of the nearly 35 million new Christmas trees purchased every year, 13 million are artificial and 22 million are real, according to the American Christmas Tree Association.

And while the convenience of a sapless, needle-less tree that stores easily for perennial use is alluring to many, it's hard to build a tradition around an artificial tree. But taking a family trip to the local tree farm to select that perfect symbol of the holidays? Now, that's a tradition.

Real trees become an extended family member for a month or so. We choose them, bring them home, set them up, decorate them and spend hours in front of them. They cover our gifts for safekeeping. They stimulate all of our senses – from the piney smell to the bright lights.

That's why choosing the perfect tree for your family is a vital part of the holiday season. Tree height, width and overall health are important factors to consider when you and your family go on your tree-picking excursion.

Here's what to look for in that perfect tree – and how to make it a special, enjoyable experience this winter:

INVOLVE THE CHILDREN

If you're bringing along your children, nieces or nephews, make sure to ask their opinion about the different trees. Give them options while you're walking around the tree farm, being sure to check out trees of varying heights, prices and colors.

Listening to their thoughts will make them feel like part of the decision-making process instead of simply being along for the ride.

LEARNING HOW TO PICK THE PERFECT TREE

You can also use the experience to teach children what to look for in a tree. The American Christmas Tree Association says to avoid trees with these features:

- Broken branches.
- Obvious wear and tear from rough transport.
- Dirty or insect-filled trees.

Consider these factors when you're deciding which tree to buy. Also be sure to premeasure your doorways and ceiling height to make sure your new tree will fit nicely in your home.



Go Caroling



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As one of the most timeless, unique ways to celebrate the Christmas season, caroling offers a great tradition for spreading holiday cheer. Singing door to door helps you build relationships with your neighbors and fellow carolers, alike.

It also helps you slow down during the hustle and bustle of the Christmas shopping season, allowing you to reconnect with the most important people around you.

PASS ON THE SPIRIT

One of the main benefits to Christmas caroling is the joy you can bring to others with your exuberant display of holiday spirit. Caroling has become a rarity of sorts during the holiday season, giving it even more meaning to people of all ages.

Besides the great feeling you'll receive from caroling, you may also find yourself offered hot chocolate or cookies at the end of your carols. Other thankful neighbors and community members may show their appreciation simply by telling you how much hearing your Christmas songs meant to them.

GROUP EXPERIENCE

Through caroling, you will create a group dynamic and camaraderie that will only add to your love for the holidays. If you haven't caroled before, quiz your friends, family members and acquaintances to see if they know of any such groups. You can also check in with your local cultural and civic centers, since they are often linked up with singing and acting organizations.

If you can't find any such groups, start your own. Invite your favorite people to join you – even if they aren't the most talented singers. Choose a couple of songs and set up a few practice sessions before hitting the town. You can color-coordinate your outfits and wear Santa hats to give your performance a little creative cohesion.

CHOOSING THE CAROLS

When choosing a list of carols to perform, go with the traditional Christmas songs that everyone knows. The main draw to caroling is its ability to bring back nostalgia and goodwill to those around you. So choose like-spirited carols that will leave your audience members smiling.

You might even add a Hanukkah song such as "Hanukkah, Oh Hanukkah" or "The Dreidel Song" to lift the spirits of those in the neighborhood who celebrate that holiday.

If your group is dynamic enough, choose songs with multiple parts that can be mixed together for a memorable carol. You can also incorporate solos, clapping and a few simple dance moves to spice things up.

Volunteer for the Holidays

We all know it's better to give than to receive, and that saying doesn't always have to pertain to presents. Your time can be a valuable commodity for community-based organizations this holiday season, as they attempt to feed, shelter and care for the less fortunate.



CHILDREN'S HOSPITALS

Many children will be confined to hospital beds this Christmas season as they battle through sickness, treatments and pain. This can also be emotionally draining for children, especially those who have experienced the joy of Christmas morning at home.

This is where you can help. Children's hospitals are great at creating special events for their patients around the holidays, especially Christmas. They will likely conduct holiday dances, meals and even trips from Santa Claus – and all of these efforts require a strong force of volunteers to aid in planning and coordinating them.

Contact your local hospital's customer service department to find out their needs and how you can meet them.

SOUP KITCHENS

Many organizations work hard every year to make sure the homeless and underprivileged receive a nice, hot meal for Christmas. You can help by volunteering your time to cook, serve food and clean up.

Groups also offer food services for the homebound, requiring volunteers to deliver meals across town. It is easy to get on a delivery schedule by simply contacting these organizations and offering your time.

NURSING HOMES

The elderly who are no longer fit to stay in their homes because of health concerns or rehabilitation processes is a group that can use holiday spirit this Christmas. And many nursing homes coordinate numerous events and trips based around the special season.

Nursing homes may also need help with donations, meal serving or other activities, so check in about a month before Christmas to see how you can help.

Cook Together

Christmas cookies baking in the oven. A juicy turkey smoking on the grill. An apple pie cooling on the table. The sights and smells of a kitchen around Christmas time are enough to excite the chef – and eater – in us all.



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Equally as fun as the actual cooking is the research that goes into finding the perfect recipe. Sit down together at a computer to look up variations for all types of meals ranging from traditional holiday roasts to vegan options. Find one recipe that everyone agrees on, print it out and get to shopping!

COOKING AND TEACHING

Cooking can be a great way to incorporate lessons on following directions. From gathering ingredients for the recipe to following the list of baking requirements, children can put together great-tasting dishes while learning about the importance of instructions.

Another benefit of spending time together in the kitchen is the opportunity to teach your children about healthy eating. Use unique ways to incorporate fruits and vegetables into your holiday recipes to promote the benefits of fresh produce.

These lessons can be translated into everyday life and school performance, making your holiday cooking tradition as educational as it is fun.

What better tradition to start than sharing time doing what we love in the kitchen?

Cooking gives us the chance to be creative, hone our craft and enjoy spending quality time together.

Whether you're a child who has limited experience in the kitchen or a high-level chef with years in the restaurant industry, cooking during the holidays is a great equalizer.

PRE-PLANNING

You don't have to limit your cooking tradition to simply working together in the kitchen. Get your friends, children and loved ones

involved in planning the menu and buying the ingredients. Mix things up from year to year by incorporating new recipes or unique twists on family favorites.

Get Out of the House

Do you and yours have a case of Christmas cabin fever? Long breaks from school and work can cause tight quarters around the holidays.

One of the best ways to overcome any extra stress or anxiety caused by this is simply getting out of the house.

This will be more feasible in warmer weather states – you probably wouldn't enjoy a flag football game in 20 inches of snow – and can greatly benefit your overall health.

GO SHOPPING

Do you have a destination shopping center you like to visit every year? Maybe a town square full of local shops offering an array of gift options? You can easily turn shopping into an annual tradition.

If you're looking for a true holiday getaway, try to plan a trip to a destination that is three to four hours away. Book a hotel with a pool and turn your shopping day into a relaxing weekend experience.

GO TO THE MOVIES

The movie theater has become a Christmas Day destination for many families across the United States. Following up your holiday meal with a trip to see the latest Hollywood hit can be a great way to beat cabin fever, while also



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establishing a great family tradition.

You can also check out your local creative arts organizations to see if they have any shows scheduled during the holiday season. They will sometimes re-enact classic Christmas tales, giving you

and your family and opportunity to see a great show.

GO OUTSIDE

Ice skating, flag football or even a game of catch can be a great way to exercise together during the holiday season.

Running around outside not only helps you enjoy the fresh air, but also burns off some of those calories from your big holiday feast.

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 every holiday season.

Handmade Arts and Crafts

Handmade holiday gifts or decorations around the house are a guaranteed hit. Too often, we are consumed in gifting the latest video game, device or expensive electronic. Sometimes ‘de-digitizing’ our Christmas gifts can be a great way to reclaim the true spirit of the holidays.

Giving from the heart – and the hands – brings great joy to both the giver and receiver of special holiday gifts.

And creating a tradition out of making handmade gifts and decorations will surely put children and adults in the holiday mindset. Some projects can be a bit time-consuming, especially considering busy school and work schedules. So start your handmade efforts in late November or early December to make sure they’re ready to be enjoyed in time.

TURN TOYS INTO ORNAMENTS

Looking for a unique way to recycle smaller, unused toys? Transforming them into ornaments will help declutter your home while also creating a meaningful tree decoration.

Simply use a needle and thread to stitch through and hang a soft toy. Insert small eyehooks into the top of your wooden toys for easy hanging.

Keep these special ornaments in a safe place every year and plan to give them to your children when they are old enough to move out and buy their own Christmas trees. You will create a lifetime of memories that can carry on for another generation to come.



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HOMEMADE CHRISTMAS CARDS

This Christmas season, choose to spend a bit more time than money on the cards you send out. Find a ream of

high-quality paper (which you can purchase for the price of one card) and pick up some inexpensive felt, yarn, buttons and glue. Then get creative.

Fold a sheet of the paper in half and affix some buttons to the front in the

shape of a snowman. Add a handwritten note to the inside of the card and glue some felt, cutout decorations, as well. Before you know it, you’ll have store-quality card at a fraction of the cost.

Support the Military

One way to start a tradition while also supporting those who protect our freedom is to donate your time or funds to military families. Many members of the military will be away from their loved ones this holiday season, making it a particularly difficult time for their husbands, wives and children.

Luckily, you can help.

Many local and national organizations have developed special Christmas programs that make huge differences in the lives of military families. You could also go directly to the member of a military family who you know personally and give them a special gift.

TOYS FOR TOTS

Your local United States Marine Corps reserve unit collects new, unwrapped toys during October, November and December each year. The toys are distributed as Christmas gifts to less fortunate children in your community. The program became an official military activity in 1995 and can be found at www.toysfortots.org.

VOLUNTEERING OPPORTUNITIES

There are many military-focused groups and organizations looking for volunteers this time of year. Check in with your local veterans' hospital, which may have the need for gifts or visitors during the holiday season.

Many veterans' associations host dinners or special events for their members and could use helping hands for preparing and serving food.

ADOPT-A-FAMILY

One ultra-popular military program is Adopt-a-Family, which coordinates wish lists from military families to citizens interested in helping fulfill them.

Simply collect your "adopted" families list, purchase the items and hand them over to your partner military organizations. They then deliver your gifts – and holiday generosity – to the family in need.

Partaking in this program and others like it can teach your children the value of giving to those less fortunate – a tradition worth carrying on for years to come.

