



# Holiday Traditions

# Choosing Your Tree

Choosing a Christmas tree for your family home is one of the most iconic of holiday traditions.

Live and artificial trees are symbols of life embedded into the holiday. Here are some tips for creating a memorable tradition for your family.

## BRING SNACKS

We all make better decisions on a full stomach. Whether you are cutting down your tree or choosing from trees that have been pre-cut in a lot, packing a Christmas cookie or two never hurts the process. A thermos of cocoa will also bring you and your family some warm holiday cheer while you shop.

## BRING TOOLS

There are a few tools to bring when choosing your tree, the first being a measuring tape. You want to make sure your tree will fit the space. If you are buying from a lot, most trees are organized by type (pine or spruce) and then by height. But don't forget to also measure diameter. Keep in mind that the branches will relax after the tree is set up in a stand, making it even fuller.

## LOOK FOR THE BEST

Check each tree's freshness before deciding on one. When



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you bend a needle, does it break in your hand? Fresh firs will snap while fresh pines should bend but not break.

When you touch the tree, the needles should stay on. A tree that seems to be losing its needles will probably be com-

pletely bald before Christmas Day. Make sure you're getting your money's worth.

Consider a local tree farm

with experts who will be able to accurately answer any questions you have on the quality and robustness of the tree.

# Getting in the Spirit

**W**e all want to feel the spirit of Christmas during the holiday season.

Maybe this involves spending some time building a snowman or attending a special church service. Taking in a holiday performance is a great way to soak up the joys of Christmas and an event you can turn into a memorable family tradition.

No matter how you find your holiday spirit, here are a few suggestions on how to do it up right.

## **CHOOSE A HOLIDAY OUTFIT**

If you look back at photos of Christmas pasts, you may notice how everyone was dressed in their holiday best, even for opening gifts on Christmas morning. While you may not be ready to part with your Christmas morning PJs, try getting dressed up for another holiday occasion, like a party or a trip to the theater.

## **CHOOSE YOUR PERFORMANCE**

Depending on where you live, there may be many options to choose from. You can find performances of “The Nutcracker” or “It’s a Wonderful Life” in your neck of the woods.

If you call a small town home and haven’t seen anything advertised in your local



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paper, try checking in with your Chamber of Commerce. Most keep a calendar of events.

**MAKE A NIGHT OF IT**  
Plan to go out to dinner before your event. This is also another occasion to show off

your holiday best. Be sure to make a reservation; this time of year many restaurants get busy and even restaurants

that don’t normally take reservations switch to this system for a month or two in order to give better customer service.

# Host a Christmas Card Party

**P**arties fill the Christmas season, so why not host one of your own? Gather friends, families and neighbors to put together one-of-a-kind creations for others.

Even those friends who may not have your enthusiasm for crafts will soon be overtaken with the joy that comes with giving to others. Providing hot cocoa, Christmas cookies and holiday music never hurts either.

Here is what you need to get started:

## GATHER SUPPLIES

Shop sales and craft stores to gather supplies for your cards. In this situation, it is best to buy more than you need; any left over supplies will be used at some point or another and will not go to waste.

Encourage others to bring odds and ends; someone's fun ribbon paired with another person's sticker collection could be just what Santa ordered.

## CHOOSE RECIPIENTS

This is the most fun part. Choose people or groups of people to receive the fruits of this labor.

There are many people who would smile at a homemade card (perhaps their only gift),



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so it might be hard to narrow down the list of recipients. Women's shelters, hospitals, nursing homes and organizations that handle sending items to active military personnel are all great choices.

## GET THE KIDS INVOLVED

Whether they are your own or the children of loved ones, encourage the kiddos to participate. Sending Christmas cards is a celebration of the season and a celebration of love and

support and you don't need to be familiar with people in order to give those sentiments. Just remember that writing notes and cards need some thought and focus to keep the sentiment meaningful. Give

the younger members of your craft team some context for who the cards are for. Children rarely need to be told what to say when it comes to sharing their hearts, so don't worry, they will turn out adorable.

# Organize a Toy Drive

Putting together a toy drive can be a fun way to be generous during the holidays. Toy drives make the difference in the lives of many families during the holiday season. And who knows, you may end up having so much fun that this act of giving becomes a holiday tradition.

Here are just a few ways to make your toy drive a success.

## PICK A DATE

The most successful toy drives are held for several days or weeks. The more time you give people, the more likely they are to remember to bring a donation. Your drive should be open for a minimum of five days to give people more than one opportunity to donate.

## CHOOSE A CAUSE

There are many organizations that work tirelessly to provide for those less fortunate. Choosing a cause before you begin will not only help you advertise your drive but will help you set parameters on the types of donations needed. Ask your friends and families which organizations are important to them to get started.

## ADVERTISE

Spread the word. Participation relies first on knowing about it. However, you need to choose how big you want your toy drive to become.

Yes, the idea is to bring in as many toys as possible, but it is important to think about what this could mean. Where are the donations being stored? If it is your home, do you have a large basement or garage? Or will these donations be taking over your living spaces? How will you transport the toys to the organization?

The answers to these questions may dictate whether this will be neighborhood effort, or if you will be advertising in the local paper.



## COLLECT

The hard part is now over. You and your group of friends have worked hard, and now it is time to relax and watch the generous donations start

coming in.

Once your drive is complete, organize the donations and arrange to drop them off to your organization. For an added touch, consider writing

a personal note to drop off with the items speaking to how much the organization means to you and your family and the experience of organizing the drive.



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# Think of Servicemembers

**M**embers of the United States Armed Forces work around the clock and around the world to keep us safe and defend our freedom. But this can mean that they can be far away from their own loved ones. Special times of year like Christmas can be especially difficult.

This is why it is important for the rest of us to do what we can to show them how much we appreciate all that they do.

Any one of the following acts would make a kind addition to your family's holiday traditions.

## **SEND A CARE PACKAGE**

Whether you are putting together a gift for a soldier you

know or just want to show your gratitude to any soldier, assembling a care package is a great way to show those in the armed forces they are remembered and loved. If you are working through a service — there are several to choose from — be sure and check with their list of items you shouldn't pack, as well as their list of items most needed. Chapstick

or sunscreen may not seem like a good gift to you but will be much appreciated.

## **VISIT WITH A VETERAN**

Just because they've returned home doesn't automatically make the holidays easier. Take a stroll through your local VA hospital and strike up a conversation with someone. Veterans are at high

risk for depression, anxiety and suicide, and visits help. Most hospitals have visiting programs, and staff are more than happy to pair you with a veteran who would love a visit.

## **HELP OTHERS HAVE A MERRY CHRISTMAS**

Family members left at home are missing their service members, too. There are fami-

lies in your community with an active service member away at Christmas. If you don't know any personally, ask around. Churches can be a great place to start. Reach out and perform one of the acts of kindness that came to your mind when you put yourself in those shoes — you may make the difference in someone's Christmas.

# 25 Days of Traditions

Everyone knows the best gift of all is the gift of time. And what better time of year than the holidays to do things with friends and family? Here are 25 traditions you can practice this December.

**Game night.** There are holiday-specific games out there, but you can't go wrong by sticking with a classic. Check out your local toy and game store for some family friendly games.

**Christmas movie marathon.** Too many choices to go wrong here. From the Griswolds to George Bailey, there's a classic for your family.

**Caroling.** Through your neighborhood or through your town, caroling is always more fun with friends.

**Holiday baking.** There is a recipe for every taste bud and every skill level. Check out online recipes for unique options. Many local grocery stores also offer holiday baking classes. Ask around for times and options.

**Christmas lights.** Put a little twinkle on your house or on your tree.

**Choose a tree.** Choosing a Christmas tree is a classic tra-



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dition with the added bonus of making your home smell amazing.

**Wear Christmas pajamas.** They don't have to match (but it's more fun if they do).

**Christmas cards.** Make them or buy them, but please send them out.

**Elf on the Shelf.** Quickly becoming a cult classic.

**Christmas cookie swap.** This party's entire premise is all about you getting to sample cookies. The holiday joy is baked right in.

**Angel tree.** Be someone

else's Santa.

**Advent calendar.** Counting down the days can be a fun tradition for the entire family.

**Ornaments.** Give your kids or loved one a new ornament each year. Over the years, the tree itself will become a family album.

**Make hot cocoa.** Yum. There are many recipes out there to completely innovate this holiday treat.

**Take a drive.** Admire others' decorations.

**Volunteer.** This is a hard time of year for others. Turn

the act of kindness into a tradition.

**Say thank you.** To your friends, to your kids, to your mom, anyone that has had an impact on you.

**Get a photo with Santa.** These will amuse you for years to come.

**Take in a show.** Or a second-grade Christmas pageant. Support local artists and students by showing up.

**Get dressed up.** Put on your best and walk the square. There is something special about getting your cheeks pink

that sparks joy this time of year.

**Get a toy, give a toy.** Teach your children to donate unwanted or old toys to others.

**Treat those you depend on.** Take cookies to the police station, the fire station and to your Post Office.

**Make a snowman.** Or, if you live in a warm climate, decorate a gingerbread house.

**Decorate a gingerbread house.** It shouldn't be an "either/or" situation.

**Leave cookies for Santa.** He's got a long night. He appreciates it.

# Peppermint Bark

**M**aking candy with family and friends could turn out to be the most delicious Christmas tradition yet! This holiday season, try your hand at peppermint bark. This is a low-stress kind of candy that is so easy to customize per your taste, includes zero wrapping and looks gorgeous.

## INGREDIENTS

12 oz. white chocolate  
12 oz. dark chocolate  
Crushed peppermint candy

## SUPPLIES

9x12 lipped cookie sheet  
Parchment paper  
Saucepan and two metal or glass bowls

1. Before you get started with the chocolates, line your pan with parchment paper. This will make your life so much easier when the candy cools.

2. Grab the dark chocolate and melt it through the double boiler method. Pour the chocolates into a glass or metal bowl, and place the bowl over a saucepan of simmering water. This allows the chocolates to melt slowly. Stir until you have a smooth consistency.

3. Next, pour the dark chocolate onto the parchment-lined pan. Allow the chocolate to spread (or help it out with a spatula) it evenly covers the surface.

4. Then, grab a second bowl and repeat the same process with the white chocolate. Your finished product will have better results if the dark chocolate is still warm when you layer the white chocolate onto it.

Again, you want an even layer.

5. Before the white chocolate cools, sprinkle your crushed peppermint candies on top.

6. Let the whole pan harden in the refrigerator for at least two hours before breaking the candy into pieces. Since the goal is a bark-like form, there is no right or wrong way to do this. These candies can be stored in a bag or airtight container on the counter, unless you live in a warm or humid climate, then the refrigerator is best.

## CUSTOMIZE

This candy is easy to customize. First, you can use any type of peppermint candy you want. Don't go looking for pre-crushed peppermint. Rather, purchase candy canes or peppermint drops and crush them yourself.

Don't like dark chocolate? Substitute milk chocolate or forgo it altogether. This is one of the few candy recipes that require only three ingredients and no thermometer. Enjoy its simplicity and yummy taste throughout the Christmas season.

