

Celebrate: The Art of the Special Occasion

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Extract

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There are lots of wonderful things about Christmas but not least is the fact that it is so utterly reliable. It never goes AWOL and is never late – always turns up bang on time, year after year. Just imagine December without it – gloomy, Gothic. As far as I'm concerned, it is a marvellous focal point for the celebration of one of the world's loveliest stories in the middle of the dark days of December. You don't have to be religious to appreciate its mythical dimension or to join in celebrating all those deep midwinter pleasures – the frost, the ice, the berries, the carols, the fireside, the gatherings of friends and families. No swanky villa in the Maldives or barbie on an Australian beach could beat a truly British Christmas.

However, there's no denying that, for a single, solitary day, it looms awfully large in the psychological landscapes of our lives. Memories of Christmases past linger on in our minds and most of us can recall even the most distant ones in technicolour detail. For children, happy memories can sustain them all through their adult years, and inspire them to pass on those experiences to children of their own – all of which is why making it special matters.

Some people will tell you that they find the whole Christmas scenario a bore. Oh, the stress, the pressure, the time it takes, not to mention the cost. Now, I'm not saying I don't fret about it, too – I'm not immune from the stresses of modern-day living – but every time I start to fret I remind myself how lucky, truly lucky, I am to have so many people in my life to love, buy presents for, to cook for, to care for.

Think for a moment how desolate it would be to have nobody you minded about at Christmas time. A friend lamented that it wasn't until her husband died that she realised how much she needed to do things for other people. Having nobody to create a bit of magic for would save time and stress, but oh, the sadness.

So I think we should resist the temptation to think too much about the stress and try to think more about the joy. It's fun, after all, to dream up ways of making it the once-a-year treat it always used to be, of making the cooking, the decorating, the present-giving a joy instead of a chore. If that sounds like nothing so much as hard work, the good news is that as more and more enterprising new businesses, both big and small, offer an ever-increasing range of services, it gets easier and easier. Here, I hope to inspire, amuse and help you bring the dream to life.

Dressing the House

It isn't just people who seem to need a bit of cheering up around now – houses could do with a bit of it, too. When it comes to glamming up the house for Christmas these are not, methinks, times for minimalism. There's too much of it about. I think we should go contracyclical and indulge in a bit of over-the-top baroque, some utter fabulousness. For if there's one thing that should be prevalent at Christmas, surely it has to be generosity, particularly of the spirit but also of the decorative variety. Concentrate on scattering a sense of warmth, welcome and largesse with great decorative flourishes.

Big, I mean seriously big, bowls of just one thing – polished apples, aubergines, oranges, lemons, kumquats, lychees, walnuts, artichokes and even beautiful purple cabbages look wonderfully decorative. Pine cones, too, look and smell gorgeous. What Christmas requires is profusion.

If you're in need of decorative inspiration, I always think a good place to start is by visiting some of the chic metropolitan emporia around about Christmas time for a bit of window shopping. They all pay highly talented designers vast amounts of money to dream up splendid schemes, and I've gleaned no end of tips by wandering through the Christmassy aisles and gazing at the displays in Liberty, Harvey Nichols, Selfridges, Harrods and their ilk. Many a small boutique owner also has a witty way with decorations, so keep your eyes peeled for clever ideas. In recent years, most stores have had a rather crystalline/frosty/white sort of moment – all very tasteful. Habitat stores often look magical at Christmas, and chic at the same time. The simple tactic of sticking to nothing but white with lots of brilliant, radiant lights does the trick.

* If you've gone in for a mainly white decorative scheme, you could add some drama in the shape of an over-the-top ruby red candelabra from Argos.

I once saw great swathes of twigs and branches at the Conran Shop, which had been painted white and intertwined with a collection of candelabra. Some florists and decorating shops sell ready-painted branches, but most people are handy enough with a brush to do it themselves.

* White is a favourite of the florist, John Carter. He arranges pussy willow, white roses, crystal drops and blue pine alongside nuts and gilded fruit, often binding fragrant cinnamon sticks, dried orange slices, fir cones and cloves into his decorations to make sure the house smells Christmassy.

Joanna Wood, the interior designer (www.joanna.wood.co.uk), often thinks 'forest' at Christmas – 'lots of logs and pine cones, twigs and leaves. If you go to Wimbledon Common, near to the Windmill, for a fee of £10 you can fill your car boot with as much of the surplus left-over from tree cutting as you can find.'

Country town fairs and street markets often sell holly, mistletoe and other greenery for very little. A friend of mine gathers together huge branches she finds in the garden. Then she simply cuts them to length and displays them in three giant glass cylinders from Habitat, which stand on the hall table looking satisfyingly theatrical. The scale creates the drama. Put tiny stems in dinky little vases and they look puny and apologetic.

If you don't have access to woods or commons, or a garden of your own to plunder, get yourself off to a flower market. Londoners who haven't made it to New Covent Garden at Nine Elms in Battersea don't know what they're missing. For instance, you could buy white roses cheaply enough to be able to decorate your tree with nothing else – put each one into a little transparent flower holder, pin the holders to the tree, and the roses will last all through Christmas. Magic. There's a £3 entrance fee charge and it's best to arrive by 7 a.m. although I never manage it much before 8 a.m. An hour there and you can pick up masses. (www.newcoventgardenmarket.com)

It's not just for the flowers that Nine Elms is worth a visit but for all the paraphernalia – skeleton wreaths, baskets of pine cones, inexpensive containers of every size, shape and material, as well as baubles, bows, 'pearls', bobbles and all the rest. Some things you have to buy in bulk – for instance, a packet of dried limes is £35, one of dried orange slices £25 and cinnamon sticks are £25, so you would do well to rope in some friends to make it economical – but nobody could fail to be inspired by a visit.

In the Beginning

If you've just moved into your first home, doing Christmas can seem rather daunting. Paging through a glossy magazine doesn't do much for one's morale. Standards seem alarmingly high and then there's so much to do – trees to decorate, stair-rails to be adorned, windows to be swathed in lights, tables to be made visually sumptuous, living-rooms to be given the magic touch. The thing to remember is that there is nothing wrong with starting small. First time round, buy a few things that you really like. Each year add more baubles and lights, ribbons and furbelows, and in no time at all you'll have a whole collection of the decorative paraphernalia that can conjure up magic at Christmas. Children will love dipping into it to help decorate the house, and every glass bauble, fairy or reindeer will become a familiar part of the Christmas ritual.

Take us, we're grandparents now to five small boys. Many moons ago, when we had our first Christmas at home, our daughter was some nine months old, but it

didn't matter that she was too young to notice – we threw ourselves into it for the fun of it, for friends and relations. We started, if I remember rightly, with a small tree, a collection of beautiful silvery baubles (which in those days, I can tell you, took some hunting down) and lots of holly and tinsel. Every year since then, we've added to the collection. Most years we've gone the rather predictable 'good taste' route – gold or silver or white. Occasionally, we've branched out into brilliant colours and experimented with a slightly more 'kitsch' aesthetic until now we have so many bits and pieces that we could orchestrate almost any theme we fancy.

There was the tartan year, which was the year I bought several metres of John Lewis's best tartan fabric and made the tablecloth that now comes out every Christmas. You could do the same with any fabric or colour scheme of your choice. Our children only have to see the cloth and it takes them back to the first year it appeared, and also to the year we rented a shooting lodge in the Highlands, filled it with friends and family and had one of the best Christmases of our lives. I bought tartan ribbons and enchanting bows from VV Rouleaux (www.vvrouleaux.com – a brilliant source for the decoratively inclined) and pinned the bows all around the tablecloth (most particularly at the corners), and tied tartan ribbons on to every candlestick in sight, and more ribbon round the napkins.

Other items in our collection include shiny, plastic droplets to be tied to candlesticks to give them a reflective glow (find them at Argos, among other places) and angels and dolls, some made by the children when they were small.

They come out year after year and top the tree or adorn the mantelpiece according to mood and moment.



UNUSUAL DECORATIONS

- * Temptation Alley in London's Portobello Road (www.temptationalalley.com) is a little-known Aladdin's cave filled with many wondrous props for Christmas, anything from glitter and feathers to buttons and bows.
- * If you want to wave some eastern promise over the celebrations, Chandni Chowk (www.chandnichowk.co.uk) is a wonderful place to find brilliantly coloured papier-mâché elephants, horses and other animals, which make great, if non-traditional, tree ornaments. Better still, make it to the real Chandri Chowk in Delhi if you ever go – amazing for glitter and baubles.



Lights

The easiest, quickest and least expensive way to lend some enchantment is with lots of fairy lights, and not just on the Christmas tree – drape them round fireplaces, up staircases, over tables, round mirrors. Strings, garlands and amazingly imaginative and inexpensive lights of every description are available almost everywhere.

- * Habitat's Cherry Blossom comes in units that cost about £48 each. Fixed to a wall, preferably white, they build into

a complete cherry blossom tree, some 8 x 3ft/2.5 x 1 metre. The whole tree needs seven units, but five also look great. Habitat also has fat ropes of lights, which burn for some 20,000 hours, for £35.

- * Brooke Lichfield, when designing a press display for Daylesford, coiled simple strings of silver and white fairy lights inside a transparent Muji desk organiser, which cost about £9 – very effective.
- * Lakeland (www.lakeland.co.uk – a cult company if ever there was one) has strings of ‘pearl’ lights for £24.99, which look terrific coiled up inside jugs or glasses. They also have red gem-cut blossom stems (£13.99 for six wired stems), which look great in vases, positioned near the lights, so they sparkle.

Candles

One lone candle in a tin lid looks forlorn and rather daft – display them in twenties, thirties and even hundreds, if you dare, and they begin to emit an air of magic. At Muji you can get a pack of 36 tea lights for £4.50 (www.muji.eu). In shops all over the country (least expensively at Lakeland and Homebase, more expensively at emporia such as the Conran Shop and Graham & Green) you can find coloured glass holders, and ceramic bowls with see-through eyelets into which you can put small candles.



CANDLES AND FLOWERS

If you run out of time, energy or money, remember that there are two simple ways of making any house look fantastic at any time – candles and flowers. John Pawson, the architect, reminds us that you can do a lot very simply: 'I love tradition and ritual – a great big bowl of polished apples looks wonderful. My father used to buy a big box of Coxes and it was my job to polish them. I always have a tree and I just put masses of tiny candles on it. I put Christmas cards out very simply on horizontal surfaces because they're lovely to look at, and get as much holly and mistletoe as I can.'



Wreaths

They add to an air of festivity and most doors on our London street adopt a wreath of one sort or another. They range from rather straggly to fat and posh. The variety is part of the fun. When, at a Spirit of Christmas exhibition, a collection of designers were asked to re-think the wreath, Clare Brew came up with a simple ring of lighted neon. Ann Shore, the co-founder of the cool shop Story (home.btconnect.com/story/), came up with a wreath made of shells, rice-paper roses and old chandelier droplets. Ercole Moroni, the hip florist at McQueens (www.mcqueens.co.uk/about/ercole.php), wrapped a disc with leaves and made a central disc of nothing but tightly packed white rosebuds.

Readymade wreaths are to be found everywhere – in shops, boutiques and online – but it's much more fun to make your own. Robbie Honey (www.robbehoney.com), a floral magician, runs a Christmas flower school to show you how. Otherwise, buy a pre-made wreath frame (£8.50 at Nine Elms) and pad it out (they can look a bit mean) with foliage from the garden or with a pack of spruce (also £8.50 from Nine Elms). Then choose your theme. You could go for traditional baubles and bows in reds and aubergines as a change from silver; or whole dried limes, larch cones, bundles of cinnamon sticks and lavender, clusters of pink peppercorns and dried orange slices.

If you prefer the non-traditional route and like the notion of painted branches in your wreath, you can find them in myriad colours in street markets, or gather and paint them yourself. Weave them round a wire wreath frame to make a nest to which you can attach decorations of your choice. Black twigs with pearls, white branches with silver sequins, and bronze branches with bronze faux leather leaves all look spectacular.

The Tree

The ritual of choosing the tree – most particularly if you have young children – is all part of the fun. Debates about the size, arrangement of the branches and all the other important things can be marvellously involving, and since trees seem to be offered for sale in every imaginable outlet for at least a month before the day, finding one to suit is not usually a problem. Nordmann pine is the one to go for since it doesn't drop its needles everywhere.

- * THE CHRISTMAS FOREST (www.christmasforest.co.uk) sells some six different varieties of trees at road junctions across London, and in addition promises to plant a tree in Burkina Faso for every one sold here.
- * TREES DIRECT (www.treesdirect.co.uk) will deliver trees all over the country, and for an extra charge will provide simple decorations in the shape of little bows and ornaments.
- * REAL TREES DIRECT (www.realtreesdirect.co.uk) will deliver, install and then collect the tree once the festivities are over. They'll also decorate it – and the entire house, if you wish.
- * JO BOGGON (www.joboggon.co.uk) will deliver a tree, ready decorated, in central London for £50 a foot. It'll have white lights, icicles, glass and frosted balls and lots of ribbons.
- * SELFRIDGES (www.selfridges.com) has what is called a ready designed tree – it will be delivered with all the non-breakable baubles and decorations, which you will then need to attach yourself. These trees range in price from £150 to £500.
- * DELEGATE LIFE (www.delegatelife.com) will deliver the tree, decorate it and collect it again afterwards. They offer a Christmas package for £495 and will do almost anything from wrapping twenty presents and organising the cards to collecting drycleaning and cleaning the oven.
- * WWW.CHRISTMASTREELAND.CO.UK is devoted almost entirely to things Christmassy, including wreaths, stockings

and stocking fillers, but is centred around the tree. All tree growers are becoming ever more environmentally aware and Christmas Tree Land has a whole section devoted to the ecology of the matter.

- * JOANNA WOOD (www.joannawood.co.uk) is just one of a number of decorators and florists who will do the whole decorative number for you. She'll buy and dress the tree (choose traditional or modern), and she'll add lights and presents. She'll dress the house, too – everything from fireplaces to swags. Prices start at £300.

Artificial Trees

Anyone who can't face the mess that usually comes with nature, or whose sensitivities are offended by the ho-hum jolliness of Santa, reindeers, holly, mistletoe and all the rest, may find that an artificial tree is the answer. They're not just cleaner and more practical, but can be used to make a strong style statement. You could, for instance, have an all-black tree – yes, really. They were all the rage just a few years ago when John Lewis, not a store usually associated with the avant-garde, was selling them at some two and a half times the rate of the more predictable green variety.

You can see the appeal. An artificial black tree fits very well with the high gloss of metropolitan surroundings. The colour scheme can be kept monochromatic – crystal and frosted glass balls (from Paperchase) and glittery lights provide magic without muddying the aesthetic waters.

Of course, there are all sorts of other options – green (for

those who want the natural look without the aggravation), blue, red, silver, gold and white – each offering up decorative possibilities of their own.

Decorating the Tree

For most of us, the tree is the focal point of Christmas, where the presents are stowed and around which we gather, so it's not surprising that we want to decorate it as prettily or gorgeously as we know how.

STYLISH LOOK: every year the Victoria & Albert Museum asks a fashionable designer to contribute to the style debate with a decorative tree of his or her own choosing. One year they turned to Kaffe Fassett, who festooned a natural tree with hand-made silk fans in rich reds, oranges, magentas and burgundies. Before that Matthew Williamson covered a tree in pale pink chiffon and velvet flowers along with golden dragonflies and butterflies. Even earlier, when it was the turn of Alexander McQueen and Tord Boontje, they chose a steel tree, which they covered in thousands upon thousands of Swarovski crystals.

Now most of this can't be replicated at home (a steel tree – how would you do it?) but you can pinch some of the ideas. Once you've hit on your theme – butterflies, silver globes or whatever you decide – head to any one of the less fancy stores, such as Argos, Habitat or House of Fraser, and buy as many armfuls of your chosen decorations as the purse will stand. Too few and it looks mean. If you find it's all looking a bit sparse, buy metres of silver ribbon and tie

masses of silver bows to the branches – silver, glitter and lots of lights always produce a magical effect.

BAUBLES: the chief thing I have to say about baubles is this – have lots of them. Every year there is some new take on them, but the whole point is that families collect them over the years. Just recently, the Conran Shop had some lovely crystal, clear baubles with a little hole in the middle into which a tea light could be inserted and then lit – very pretty indeed, though you'd need to keep a watchful eye out for the flames. John Lewis often has some battery-operated tea lights, called Lifelogic, which have something of the same effect.

Some of the small niche mail-order companies sell slightly unusual baubles. Plümo (www.plumo.com), for instance, has some deliciously glittery sequin balls in all colours (six for £29). Joanna Wood (see above) has masses of frosty icicles, raindrops and teardrops to hang on the tree.

* If you're having an outdoor tree, the really modish, funky pot to put it in is the oversized Bloom pot, which is lit from inside. These come in white, pink, blue and orange and cost £175 from Aram (www.aramdesigns.co.uk) if you want to splash out.

The Stocking

'The Perfect Stocking'

A large-size golf stocking

A tangerine (wrapped in gold paper) in the toe and a tinsel ball in the heel to preserve shape

A packet of alphabet biscuits that spell 'A Happy
 Christmas'
 Chocolate letters that spell the owner's name
 A purse with a new sixpence in it
 A box of dominoes
 Happy families [card game]
 A walnut with either a thimble or a toy soldier
 inside
 Chocolates covered in gold and silver that look like
 money
 A magnet
 Some wire puzzles
 A pencil sharpener like a globe of the world
 A box of chalks
 A little box of 'transfers'
 Gay crackers sticking out of the top
 Rose Heniker Heaton, from *The Perfect Christmas* (1932)

Where would Christmas be without Christmas stockings?
 It's unthinkable. Planning treats for the stockings, and
 the frenzied filling of them on Christmas Eve, is a major part of
 the ritual. For parents, it's a rite of passage – like sewing on
 name-tapes, doing the school-run and freezing on the side-lines
 on sports day. When our children were small, the stockings and
 the decorations were the only preparations that my husband and
 I actually did together (otherwise we divided up the tasks – I
 looked after food, he did the drink, that sort of thing). Late on

Christmas Eve, we took one stocking apiece (we had two children – with larger families, you probably have to start earlier). Stocking presents don't have to be beautifully wrapped – they're torn open by the children in a frenzy in the dim early light of Christmas morning. All that matters is that everything is hidden and secret. I used to use all the left-over wrapping paper and sticky tape.

Perhaps one or two presents might get some more elaborate treatment with a bow or a flower. Of course, there has to be a tangerine and some chocolate. Other traditional essentials are a small soft toy and something to read. We also used to track down little packs of cards, dice and other games, cute-shaped rubbers, coloured pencils with their names on them and other small bits and pieces. Gimmicky toys are available from www.firebox.com and www.myredpacket.com, which has such tasteless fancies as the wind-up racing grannies (they're pushing zimmer frames) and the fighting granddads (they use walking sticks).

As for the stocking itself, in the olden days – you know, those years before we all got so spoiled – children used to put out one of their own woollen socks or, if one was a bit of a chancer, a pillow-case. These days, a whole host of ready-made stockings are available to buy, from tasteful to neutral and from truly vulgar to utterly charming. Take your pick. They're in every department store and many online shops have particularly gorgeous selections – try www.thewhiteco.com.

I really think you shouldn't delegate filling the stockings but if, say, you've got octuplets, or you're a cardio-thoracic surgeon on constant standby, or simply a frenzied multi-

tasker, then it's better surely to get somebody else to do it than witness the disappointment on all the little faces come Christmas morning. You can order stockings online, empty or filled, at varying prices via www.handpickedcollection.com, www.notonthehighstreet.com and www.santaselves.com, all of which either bring together a host of unlikely small, often craft-based, companies that don't have a website of their own, or provide links to companies that can help. If that's what it takes to keep you cool, calm and collected (or, more realistically, less frazzled), then go for it.

Crackers

Rather than buying them, why not make your own? They're dead easy, although you'll have to buy in the snaps. Take an empty loo roll, put your present, joke and the snap inside it. Lay the loo roll on the paper of your choice – tissue paper, crêpe paper, patterned paper – and cut a piece that will fold round it and extend beyond each end, making sure the snap is reachable. Glue the paper in place and tie a ribbon round it at each end of the loo roll. If you've used plain paper, you can add glitter, stars and stickers to pretty it up.

* Biome Lifestyle (www.biomelifestyle.com) has crackers that include an eco-tip instead of a joke, and the little pressies are things like wildflower seeds, which have a certain charm.