



# *Holidays at Home*

*Your guide to a festive and  
safe holiday season*

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Creating the right ambiance in your space is key to holiday decorating success.

## ITS TIME TO GET YOUR HOME READY FOR THE HOLIDAY SEASON



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## HOLIDAY MOVIE TRADITIONS

# Classic holiday films families can enjoy together

‘Christmas Story,’ Laurel and Hardy among classics to watch with loved ones

The holiday season is steeped in tradition. Few traditions may elicit more collective belly laughs than holiday movie night, a tradition in millions of households across the globe. Families can consider these classic holiday films as they plan family movie night this holiday season.

▪ “Miracle on 34th Street” (1947). This classic is centered around a man named “Kris Kringle” (Edmund Gwenn) who claims to be the real Santa Claus after a successful stint as a department store Santa in midtown Manhattan. A trial to determine if Mr. Kringle is telling the truth soon follows. This version of the tale has earned a 96 percent rating on the popular film review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes.

▪ “A Christmas Story” (1983). Though it airs all day long on Christmas on the cable television network TBS, families can get a head-start on that marathon and watch the film uninterrupted whenever they choose. Families can laugh together as 9-year-old Ralphie (Peter Billingsley) hopes to unwrap his official Red Ryder BB gun on Christmas morning. The film, which boasts an 89% hkbhjn bv on Rotten Tomatoes, includes a memorable performance by Darren McGavin, who plays Ralphie’s father.

▪ “Babes In Toyland” (1934). Also known as “March of the Wooden Soldiers,” this nearly century-old classic stars the legendary comedy duo Laurel and Hardy as two helpful tenants living in Mother Peep’s shoe in Toyland.

▪ “How the Grinch Stole

Christmas” (1967). An animated version of the Dr. Seuss classic, this film has entertained scores of children since it was first released more than 50 years ago.

▪ “Holiday Inn” (1942). Hollywood legends Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire star in this classic that is perhaps most remembered for introducing the Irving Berlin class “White Christmas” to the masses. The film boasts a 100% rating on Rotten Tomatoes and has something for fans of song, dance and romance.

▪ “Arthur Christmas” (2011). Not all Christmas films date back to the 20th century. This animated tale tells the story of Arthur (voiced by James McAvoy), Santa’s youngest son who is thrust into the Christmas Eve business of delivering presents when his father fails to deliver a present to one child out of the hundreds of millions of kids on his list.

▪ “A Christmas Carol” (1951). Many holiday season celebrants cannot imagine letting a season go by without watching at least one adaptation of Charles Dickens’ classic tale. The 1951 version is widely considered the most faithful to Dickens’ 1843 novella that recounts the story of Ebenezer Scrooge. Alastair Sim stars as Scrooge.

*Story courtesy of Metro Creative Connection*

PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

**RIGHT:** Consider classic holiday films when planning your next movie night with family or friends this holiday season.



## HOME SAFETY

# How to reduce risk of fires this holiday season

Safety might not be the first thing people think of as the holiday season approaches. Faith, celebrations, decorations, and holiday dinners all come to mind when considering the holiday season. But that doesn't mean safety should be left out of holiday planning.

Fire safety bears special consideration during the holiday season, when the prevalence of fire hazards like Christmas trees, holiday lighting displays and other decorative items increase the risk for home

fires. Such tragedies can be averted with a few simple safety measures.

- Tend to your tree. Live Christmas trees are awe-inspiring, but they also pose a significant fire risk. The National Fire Protection Association urges celebrants to purchase only healthy trees with fresh, green needles that do not fall off when touched. Such trees are less likely to dry out, especially when well-watered throughout the season. Dry trees can catch fire more easily than healthy trees if embers from

nearby fireplaces or candles drift in their direction.

- Recognize that location matters when decorating. The NFPA notes that Christmas trees should always be placed at least three feet away from any heat source, including fireplaces, space heaters, heat vents, candles, and even overhead lights. If decorating with candles, never place them on the tree or on tables where other flammable decorations have already been placed. Chanukah menorahs should never

be placed near curtains or other decorations.

- Turn off all lights and extinguish all lit decorative items when leaving the home or going to bed. Lit candles and menorahs should never be left unattended. The NFPA recommends turning tree lights and exterior decorative lights off when leaving the home or going to bed.

- Utilize a fire screen on fireplaces. Embers can catch on trees, decorations or anything else that's flammable if they escape the fireplace.

Fire screens prevent that from happening by ensuring embers from burning logs stay in the fireplace. Like candles and menorahs, fires burning in a fireplace should never be left unattended. Make sure all embers have been extinguished before leaving the home or going to bed.

- Keep discarded trees away from your home. A 2014 analysis from the NFPA found that none of the ten days with the largest share of Christmas tree fires were before Christmas.

Dried out trees still pose a fire risk even after they've been removed from a home. When discarding a tree at the end of the holiday season, place it at the curb or keep it a safe distance away from your home and garage until you can.

Fire safety measures are an important component of the holiday season that can prevent this joyous time of year from turning tragic.

*Story courtesy of Metro Creative Connection*



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Fire safety measures are an important component of the holiday season that can prevent this joyous time of year from turning tragic.

## ENTERTAINING

# Treat guests to a beloved holiday staple

The holiday season is steeped in tradition. Many traditions are decades if not centuries old, while others do not have such lengthy histories. One younger tradition that many people cannot go without during the holiday season is centered around a wildly popular beverage made at an equally well-liked coffeehouse chain.

The peppermint mocha was introduced to Starbucks customers during the 2002 holiday season. The beverage became something of an instant classic and is now served at more than 30,000 stores across the globe.

Holiday hosts can bring the peppermint mocha into their own homes this holiday season thanks to Starbucks. Though Starbucks notes the following DIY recipe for the “Peppermint Mocha” isn’t the official recipe, it can help holiday hosts impress their guests and satisfy their cravings for this beloved beverage should families find themselves snowed in during their holiday gatherings this year.

*Story courtesy of Metro Creative Connection*

## DIY PEPPERMINT MOCHA

Makes one 12-ounce beverage  
Preparation time: 10 minutes

- 1 fluid ounce coffee or 1 shot espresso, such as Starbucks Christmas Blend or Starbucks Espresso Roast Coffee
- 1/2 cup milk (or dairy alternative)
- 2 tablespoons peppermint-flavored syrup
- 3 tablespoons mocha sauce Whipped Cream Dark chocolate or shaving

1. On a stovetop, heat milk on medium setting. Whisk the milk to make foam about 30 seconds. Set aside. (Or, use an electric milk frother at home if you have one.)

2. Pour two tablespoons chocolate sauce and two tablespoons peppermint syrup into bottom of 12-ounce or larger coffee mug.

3. Add one shot of brewed espresso. (Don't have an espresso machine? Make concentrated coffee by using less water in an alternative brewing method.)

4. Fill mug with steamed milk.

5. Top with whipped cream and garnish with chocolate shavings.

*Courtesy of Metro Creative Connection*



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

The peppermint mocha is a popular drink enjoyed during the holiday season.

## ENTERTAINING

# Entertain for less this holiday season

The holiday season brings an abundance of feelings that may include joy, comfort, gratitude, and unfortunately, stress. Don't let the task of entertaining friends and family break the bank or your back.

Instead, create memorable gatherings with loved ones while saving time and money in the process using these hosting tips from the experts at Dollar General:

## Delicate Décor

Creating the right ambiance in your space is key to holiday decorating success. Begin by decluttering the areas of your home where you plan to entertain. Fill the extra spaces with seasonal decorations. Remember, elaborate, expensive items aren't always needed to make a home

look amazing. Decorations like small figurines, bowls filled with holiday candy or simple wreaths and garlands can do the trick of transforming your home into a winter wonderland!

## Fruitful Food

With more guests comes more food, but it doesn't have to mean spending more money. Shopping at discount retailers for essentials such as milk, eggs, bread and cheese can help stretch your budget. You can also make the switch to private brand items and save even more when buying foods for overnight guests, such as granola bars, cereal and snacks. Consider purchasing these household basics from a local Dollar General store, which also pro-

vides digital coupons to help you save even more.

## Supplies Stock-Up

Of course, to entertain, you will need supplies. Stocking up on cleaning essentials, everyday cooking ingredients and entertaining basics early in the season is a great way to have everything needed before the party begins. Consider adding items such as trash bags, cutlery, paper products, other decorations and even small gifts.

By using smart shopping strategies, you can entertain during the holidays with ease instead of stress.

*Story courtesy of StatePoint*



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

By using smart shopping strategies, you can entertain during the holidays with ease instead of stress.



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

## ENTERTAINING

# Make-ahead meals for tasty holiday dinners

Individuals may be presented with plenty of opportunities to cook for a crowd over the course of a typical year. But no time of year is more synonymous with large sit-down meals than the holiday season.

Certain foods, such as pasta dishes and casseroles, are ideal dishes to cook for crowds. However, for those home cooks who want to prepare in advance and then enjoy themselves on the actual holiday, it may be best to choose

foods that taste better the day after the dish has been cooked. Many recipes develop deeper flavor profiles after they have been left to rest and are then reheated. Holiday hosts can explore these ideas for meals that can be cooked in advance and taste even better when reheated after a day in the refrigerator.

▪ **Stew.** A stew that's been simmering on the stove or in the slow cooker all day will have a winning flavor. But stew can be even

more delicious the next day. The starch in the potatoes will enable the sauce of the stew — whether it's tomato-based or comprised of a mix of brown gravy and meat drippings — to thicken. The meat may continue to cook and tenderize while reheating. As a one-pot meal, stew is simple to prepare in advance and then serve in an attractive crock for the holidays.

▪ **Meatloaf.** The herbs and spices in a meat loaf continue to release their

flavors, and letting the loaf sit can improve the texture and the ability to slice it without it falling apart. Consider pan-frying individual slices of meatloaf until they're browned so they'll be crisp on the outside and tender in the middle.

▪ **Lasagna.** Lasagna is a layered pasta dish featuring flat noodle sheets, cheese, sauce, and sometimes meat like ground beef or sausage. Lasagnas that are served right out of

the oven can be runny even if they taste scrumptious. Baking it and letting it sit overnight allows all of the layers to gel together, making for a much more cohesive and fortified dish the following day.

▪ **Curries.** Curries are typically made with many spices that help to make the dish flavorful. A curry that is freshly made may feature intense flavor because each of its components can be tasted individually. After a night of

resting in the refrigerator, those flavors meld and mellow. Furthermore, if potatoes are used in the recipe, a night in the fridge gives the potatoes an opportunity to absorb the spices, making for an even tastier meal.

Many meals can be made ahead of time for holiday dinners and will taste even better when they are served the following day.

*Story courtesy of Metro Creative Connection*



Lasagna is a layered pasta dish featuring flat noodle sheets, cheese, sauce, and sometimes meat like ground beef or sausage.

PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION



Small textures are appealing and add safety. The added texture and grouting will keep feet from slipping on wet floors.

PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

## HOME IMPROVEMENT

# Must-have features in your bathroom remodel

Veteran homeowners recognize the value of remodeling their kitchens and bathrooms. Kitchens and baths tend to appear dated more quickly than other spaces, such as living rooms and bedrooms, which can always be revamped with some fresh paint and new furnishings.

The home improvement pricing resource Home Guide indicates an average bathroom remodel costs anywhere from \$5,500 to \$15,000 depending on the size and scope of the renovation. However, a bath redo can increase a home's resale value and can return as much as 68% of homeowners' investments. As homeowners plan their bathroom renovations, it's a good time to consider improvements that will improve function and add design appeal for years to come.

- **Floating vanity.** Add an airy feeling to the room by creating space between the vanity and the floor. A floating vanity can be a counter with a vessel sink or even have cabinets, as long as the vanity doesn't extend to the floor.

- **Freestanding traditional sink or tub.** There's something elegant about a freestanding tub or pedestal sink. Such features can lend a classic vibe to a space. However, freestanding fixtures also come in modern or eclectic forms, so there are options for any design style.

- **Frameless showers.** Switch to a walk-in shower option, which improves aesthetics and makes it easier to "age in place" in a home. Pair that frameless shower with clear glass shower doors so sightline in the space remains unencumbered.

- **Natural textures.** Create a calm and serene sanc-

tuary in the bathroom with light, natural hues and materials. Nature-inspired colors on tiles, walls and vanities can add to the spa vibe.

- **Dual sinks and vanities.** With a double vanity, two people can share the space and easily use the bathroom without getting in each other's way. One vanity with two sinks works, but homeowners can create even more personal space by dividing vanities and mirrors.

- **Small textured tile on shower floors.** Small textures are appealing and add safety. The added texture and grouting will keep feet from slipping on wet floors. Also, opt for mold-resistant grout to make cleanup even easier.

- **Special shower heads.** Invest in shower heads that can run the gamut from creating steam showers to rainfall effects. Some showers will have multiple shower jets to offer an invigorating experience.

- **Improve drainage.** Increase the diameter of the drain pipe in the bathroom from the standard to a two-inch drain pipe. This will reduce the risk of clogs and overflow leaks.

- **Install a window.** Natural light and air flow can reduce the risk for mold and mildew growth, and windows add some aesthetic appeal to a space. Just be sure to choose frosted privacy glass.

Additional considerations for a bath remodel include heated floors, well-placed and attractive storage options and a toilet enclosure (water closet) for added privacy. These and other bathroom renovation ideas can add value and improve the appeal of the room.

*Story courtesy of Metro Creative Connection*



PHOTOS COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

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## HOLIDAY SHOPPING

# 8 smart home gadgets that make great gifts

As the weather continues to get cooler, people are likely to spend more of their time inside their homes. What could be better to gift your friends and family this holiday season than the latest tech gadgets that help make life easier and more relaxing at home.

Whether you're looking for a gift for others or looking to update your own home with the latest smart home technology, there are plenty of gadgets on the market that not only make your life easier, but can also help to save energy and money.

With so many smart home devices to choose from, it can be overwhelming deciding which to purchase — especially when considering one as a gift. To help narrow it down, here's a list of some of the top smart home gadgets in 2021, reviewed by TechRadar:

## 1. Philips Hue

### *Best Smart Lights*

The best smart light bulbs are the easiest way to start your smart home journey, and there's no better out there than the Philips Hue. Simple to install — just swap your existing bulbs with smart Hue bulbs — or opt for any of Hue's array of LED table and floor lamps, wall lights both for inside and outdoors, ceiling pendants, light strips and even light bars. They offer a range of customizable scheduling options too.

You will need to get the Philips Bridge, which is kind of like a hub for your lights, if you want to control them when you're away from home — they have Bluetooth built-in so you can control them when you're close by. However, this also adds HomeKit support, to Alexa and

Google Assistant integration. They're also the most expensive smart bulb on the market, but we think they're worth every penny.

## 2. Amazon Echo Studio

### *Best Smart Speaker*

In the Echo Studio, Amazon has made its best speaker yet. It's a bombastic speaker, packed full of not just smart home and assistant tech, but smart audio considerations too. At its best, its 3D audio effects breathe new life into your favorite songs, and that's saying nothing of its ability to connect to your Amazon Fire TV devices to offer more immersive sound.

The Echo Studio also doubles up as a ZigBee hub, so it can connect to 1,000s of smart home products, right out of the box, making it ideal for a smart home.

## 3. Arlo Pro 4

### *Best Home Security Camera*

It's easy to see why Arlo is a popular choice with those who take home security seriously. Sure, the Arlo Pro 4 doesn't have a 4K resolution like the more expensive Arlo Ultra and Arlo Ultra 2 — but the quality is still a pretty impressive 2K, which will be detailed enough for most.

It's the first Arlo Pro camera that can be connected directly to your Wi-Fi, so it doesn't come bundled with a base station, making it more affordable. However, while it boasts Alexa and Google Assistant integration, you will need that base station if you want HomeKit support.

On test, it recorded clear, detailed footage that was in color both during the day and at night thanks to the built-in spotlight,



PHOTO COURTESY OF EVE

The Eve Energy smart plug is more than just a way to control devices plugged into it. It's also a way to monitor your energy usage, and get estimates on how much powering certain devices in your home is going to cost.

which also helps deter intruders just like the built-in alarm. There's also automatic zooming and motion tracking, so the source of any activity is not only detected but also followed.

Unfortunately, many of its smart features to reduce unwanted alerts require a monthly subscription, which starts from \$2.99, although you do get a three-month trial.

## 4. Eve Energy

### *Best Smart Plug*

Every smart home needs a smart plug — it's one of the simplest ways to automate your home. The Eve Energy smart plug is more than just a way to control devices plugged into it, however. It's also a way to monitor your energy usage, and get estimates on how much powering certain devices in your home is going to cost. This is great if you're trying to save some money and be a bit more energy conscious.

The smart plug uses Bluetooth, although if you have a HomePod Mini or an Ap-

ple TV in your home, you'll be able to use Thread — a wireless technology that's also built-in to the plug. More stable than Wi-Fi, Thread helps put an end to smart home devices failing to respond. However, the smart plug only supports HomeKit — it won't work with Alexa or Google Assistant, unfortunately.

On test, it was responsive and offers plenty of handy features such as the ability to set schedules, making it our pick of the smart plug market.

## 5. Eufy Video Doorbell 2K

### *Best Video Doorbell*

The Eufy Video Doorbell 2K strikes the right balance between price, reliability, and performance. On test, it captured clear, detailed footage both during the day and at night, with a 4:3 ratio so you can see almost the full length of someone on your doorstep. The best bit? It can be used subscription-free, as video can be stored to the 16GB



PHOTO COURTESY OF EUFY

The Eufy Video Doorbell 2K strikes the right balance between price, reliability, and performance.

of memory in the bundled base station. Eufy says this is around two week's worth.

The battery-powered doorbell is good if you're renting a place and can't take out the old doorbell that's already installed — it works wirelessly with the help of a hub that connects to your router, you can simply throw it on any outdoor surface and get it to work for up to six months at a time.

However, the battery isn't swappable so the doorbell will be out of action when it needs recharging, and

there's no HomeKit support.

## 6. Google Nest Hub Max

### *Best Smart Display*

The Google Nest Hub Max is a larger version of the Google Nest Hub (initially known as the Google Home Hub), a smart speaker with a screen. It also has a front-facing camera and can plug into the Google-owned Nest platform to act as a smart home camera. This part of the Google Nest Hub Max needs a little work judging by our experience.

The Google Nest Hub Max can also be used to manage and control hundreds of smart home devices such as smart lights, thermostats, and smart plugs, from a range of different manufacturers, putting an end to having to use several different apps.

It sounds good enough to act as a mini Hi-Fi, Google Assistant feels responsive and the large screen lets you watch YouTube while you cook.

Although the Google Nest Hub Max had some slight issues at launch, it's still not just a great smart display but a great smart speaker and a way to stay entertained while you wait for your onions to sauté.

## 7. Nest Learning Thermostat

### *Best Smart Thermostat*

Nest was among the first companies to inject machine learning into heating and cooling your home, and since then has been hailed as the best smart thermostat manufacturer.

Simple to use, the Nest Learning Thermostat looks elegant and on test intelligently adjusted our heating schedule based on how long it took our home to heat up and cool down, such energy and money in the process.

The Nest Learning Thermostat works with Google Assistant, but there's no HomeKit support and unlike many other smart thermostats, it doesn't offer zonal control allowing to adjust the temperature of each room individually, but for most people, this will be everything they need.

## 8. August Smart Lock Pro

### *Best Smart Lock*

The August Smart Lock Pro is one of the easiest smart locks to fit, but it's loaded with features making it the best smart lock you can buy right now.

It fits onto your existing dead-bolt and allows you to keep using your old key when you (or your landlord) want to, while still adding the benefits of a smarter lock. On test, we found it responsive and it was strong too, we weren't able to bypass it in any way. The addition of support for Alexa, Google Assistant, and HomeKit, just reinforces why this is our pick.

It is bulky and expensive com-

pared to most other smart home products, but for those looking to beef up their smart security it's worth investing in.

### What to consider when buying smart home devices

Before purchasing smart home devices, start by deciding which voice assistant you plan on using to control your smart home; Alexa, Google Assistant and Apple's HomeKit. Not all smart devices integrate with all assistants, so if you have a preference or already have one of these voice assistants in your home, for example in the form of a smart display or smart speaker, make sure any smart home devices you look to buy work with this voice assistant.

If you already have other smart home gadgets already installed in your property, you'll need to check whether any new devices can work with them if you want to create automations. Also think about installation, and if you can install them yourself, such as smart light bulbs or whether they need a professional to visit your home, such as smart thermostats, or if you're considering



PHOTO COURTESY OF AUGUST

The August Smart Lock Pro is one of the easiest smart locks to fit, but it's loaded with features making it the best smart lock you can buy right now.

smart electrical sockets for example.

Finally, check whether you need to invest in a smart home hub to make the devices work together, or whether any smart speakers or smart displays you already have in your home, can do this job for you. Alternatively, on-

line services such as IFTTT, can make some compatible devices work together to perform certain automations, without the need for a hub at all.

### Are smart homes worth it?

Creating a smart home takes plenty of time, patience and in

some cases money, but when up and running they can make your life easier, which more than outweighs the effort it takes to create them.

If you're concerned that a smart home might not be for you, consider dipping your toe in the water with affordable, simple to install smart home devices, such as smart plugs, which connect to your existing electrical outlets, or replace your existing light bulbs with smart versions. You can use your smartphone to control these devices.

When you're ready to take the next step, throw a smart speaker or smart display into the mix, to use your voice to control your smart home gadgets and create some basic home automations.

If you're the forgetful type, being able to switch off the coffee maker, hair straighteners or even the light that you accidentally left on, without having to return home, makes your life easier and ensures you're not wasting energy and money at the same time.

Read more at TechRadar.com.

Content courtesy of TechRadar



The Google Nest Hub Max is a larger version of the Google Nest Hub (initially known as the Google Home Hub), a smart speaker with a screen.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GOOGLE



Cookies are a tradition passed down through the ages.

PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

## HOLIDAY FUN

# Tips and tricks for cutting out cookies

Baking is a holiday tradition in many households. The aroma of freshly baked cakes, pies and cookies wafts through the air of many homes this time of year, and that makes the holiday season even more special.

In medieval Europe, small, spiced cookies were exchanged as treats, and people still bake and share gingerbread cookies today.

Cut cookies are some of the most popular cookies to make during the holiday season. Some families may have their share of favorite cookie cutter shapes and dough recipes. Certain techniques can make holiday baking sessions easier and ensure consistent results.

- Work on a lightly floured, cool surface, such as a cutting board or stone counter top. Never work on a warm surface, which can cause dough to spread and stick.

- Roll out the dough between two sheets of baking or parchment paper. Betty Crocker recommends a thickness of about 1/8 inch, unless noted in the recipe. This prevents the dough from sticking, and parchment enables you to easily transfer rolled-out dough to a refrigerator or elsewhere.

- When rolling out dough, portion it out into a few smaller amounts to roll out more easily. This will also help it to chill more readily.

- Cookies cut most easily when the dough is chilled. Refrigerate the dough for as long as possible, ideally an hour or more — even overnight. The more chilled, the firmer the dough will be.

- Rubber rolling pin rings that slip onto each side of the rolling pin can help ensure that the dough is being rolled out to a uniform thickness.

- Dip cookie cutters into flour with each cut. Work from the center and move out to the edges when cutting out your designs. Try to maximize space and avoid scraps and rerolling.

- Some expert bakers say that metal cookie cutters cut cleaner than plastic ones. Whichever



PHOTOS COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Certain techniques can make holiday baking sessions easier and ensure consistent results.

cutter you use, cut the cookie by pressing straight down; try not to twist or jiggle the cookie cutter when using it. Doughs with a high butter content can help, as the extra grease helps separate the dough from the cutters.

- If cut cookies have gotten warmer, place them in the freezer for a few minutes to firm up again and then cook. This will guarantee the cookies will not spread or distort while baking.

Extra steps may seem like they will take a lot of time. However, the extra effort and attention to detail will help produce cookies that win rave reviews.

*Story courtesy of Metro Creative Connection*



A little extra effort and attention to detail will help produce cookies that win rave reviews.



Where you hang the wreath is key to its longevity.

PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

## HOLIDAY DECOR

# How to care for fresh holiday wreaths

Majestic Christmas trees garner the lion's share of the decorative fanfare when the holidays arrive. Trees may be the focal points of holiday decor, but the humble wreath adorning the front door is the first decoration guests are likely to see when visiting a home.

Wreaths may need some care to maintain their beauty all month long. Here are some tips to help holiday wreaths last as long as possible.

- Choose a wreath wisely. When shopping for a wreath, choose freshly cut greenery that you assemble yourself; otherwise, look for wreaths made from freshly cut boughs with their foliage intact. Make sure not too many needles or leaves are falling off. Heavily decorated, preassembled wreaths may be convenient, but ornaments can make it challenging to give the wreath the moisture it needs to survive.

- Moisture/water. Access to moisture will help to keep the wreath fresh. While a Christmas tree trunk may sit inside of a stand filled with water, wreaths require a little ingenuity. According to the wreath and garland retailer Club Botanic, if you will not be hanging a freshly purchased wreath right away, keep it in a plastic liner in a cool, dark place to help it retain moisture. Just make sure you don't seal that liner closed. Before hanging, lay the wreath in a couple of inches of water for about an hour or up to a day so that the cut stems can soak up water. Once the wreath is hanging on a door or elsewhere, spritz it with water every few days to prevent it from drying out.

- Location, location, lo-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

When shopping for a wreath, choose freshly cut greenery that you assemble yourself; otherwise, look for wreaths made from freshly cut boughs with their foliage intact.

cation. Wreaths and garlands hung indoors likely won't last as long as those hung outside, advises the floral retailer Bouqs.com. Evergreen boughs tend to require a colder climate to thrive, and indoor heat can prematurely zap moisture from the wreath. Using a humidifier indoors or misting the wreath may help. It's probably best to hang fresh wreaths outdoors, but avoid direct sunlight, which can dry out the

greenery. Slightly shaded spots are best. If your front door is bathed in full sun for hours, hang an artificial wreath here instead of a fresh one.

- Maintain airflow. Another factor that can affect the wreath's longevity is an ample flow of oxygen. Wreaths tend to last much longer when kept on an outer door, indicates Harbor Farm in Ellsworth, ME. Wreaths sandwiched between a front door and

a storm door will probably perish faster due to lack of oxygen.

Following these tips can help keep fresh wreaths as vibrant as the day they were brought home.

*Story courtesy of Metro Creative Connection*

**Right:** Following these tips can help keep fresh wreaths as vibrant as the day they were brought home.





PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

It's essential that the power to the circuit that will be worked on be turned off prior to starting any work.

## HOME MAINTENANCE

# Safety first with do-it-yourself electrical work

Home improvement projects can help homeowners transform their homes. Such projects are costly, but many homeowners save money by doing some, if not all, of the work themselves.

The Electrical Safety Foundation International, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting electrical safety, recommends that homeowners leave electrical work to the professionals. Licensed electricians are well-trained, whereas homeowners may not be skilled enough to avoid accidents or injuries, which can prove fatal when working with electricity.

Homeowners who take the do-it-yourself route with electrical work should consider these safety tips, courtesy of the ESFI, before beginning a home electrical project.

## Learn your home electrical system

Home electrical systems may include power lines, electric meters, service panels, subpanels, wiring, and more. These systems are complex, and homeowners who intend to do some DIY electrical work should familiarize themselves with their home electrical systems prior to beginning any work. The ESFI notes that knowledge of their home electrical systems can help homeowners more safely navigate them and make maintenance easier.

## Honestly assess your skills

An honest assessment of skills is absolutely necessary prior to working on an electrical system. According to the National Safety Council, injuries relating to electrical incidents typically fall into one of



Homeowners who take the do-it-yourself route with electrical work should consider these safety tips.

four categories: electrical shock, electrocution, falls, and burns. Each of these injuries is significant. For example, electric shock, which occurs when electrical current passes over or through a person's body, involves burns, abnormal heart rhythm and unconsciousness. Given the potential for serious injury, the ESFI urges homeowners to make an honest assessment of their skills be-

fore they begin working on their home's electrical systems. Little or no experience working with electrical systems should be considered a significant hurdle to any DIY project.

## Turn the power off

It's essential that the power to the circuit that will be worked on be turned off prior to starting any work. This can be accomplished by switching off the circuit

breaker in the main service panel. Similarly, when working on appliances or lamps, make sure the products are unplugged prior to working on them.

## Do not touch plumbing or gas pipes when doing electrical work

The experts at the Indiana Electric Cooperative note that the risk for electrocution is signifi-

cant when water comes in contact with electricity. It's imperative that homeowners do not touch plumbing and gas pipes when performing a DIY electrical project. Professionals know how to work around such pipes while minimizing their risk for electric shock or worse, and homeowners must familiarize themselves with the techniques professionals rely on to stay

safe if they intend to begin DIY electrical projects. Homeowners are best served by leaving electrical work to the professionals. However, those who insist on doing such work themselves should do their homework and get to know their systems and safety protocols prior to beginning a project.

*Story courtesy of Metro Creative Connection*



PHOTOS COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

As shoppers hit the holiday shopping trail once more, they can look to the pandemic for gift-buying inspiration.

## HOLIDAY SHOPPING

# Post-pandemic gifts for friends and loved ones

Families, businesses, schools, and just about everyone had to modify daily life in dramatic ways due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the most significant effects of COVID-19 — beyond the health implications — have been the changes in outings and gatherings and the ways holidays were celebrated.

The 2021 holiday season figures to be especially jovial as the world continues to emerge from the pandemic. As shoppers hit the holiday shopping trail once more, they can look to the pandemic for gift-buying inspiration.

## Travel-related gifts

Travel restrictions greatly limited where people could go, so millions embraced staycations as a means to taking breaks from school and work. Travel restrictions have now been lifted in many parts of the world, and vaccinated individuals may feel more comfortable traveling again. Consider gifts that include travel essentials, such as luggage, plane tickets, toiletries, hotel vouchers, and even gift cards to use on vacation purchases.

## Preparatory gifts

People are much more “germ-conscious” as a result of the pandemic. Cases of COVID-19 are on the decline, but it still pays to be cautious and sanitary. Gifts that promote cleanliness may continue to be appreciated and also prepare a person should another pandemic occur in the future. Stylish reusable face masks; special sanitary “keys” that limit contact with things like ATMs, doors and elevator buttons; ultraviolet disinfecting lamps; and even purses and bags that can be cleaned without damage are all gift ideas that make cleanliness more convenient.

## Home improvement supplies

In the wake of canceled vacation plans, homeowners channeled their vacation dollars into home improvements. Those who still have plans to redo and renovate will appreciate gifts that may include gift cards to popular home improvement and design retailers. In addition, as certain home improvement materials like lumber have gotten more expensive, a cash gift to offset the cost of materials can help people see projects through to completion.

## Dining out vouchers

Even though many restaurants pivoted to takeout service or established outdoor seating to meet safety requirements, dining establishments still felt the pain of the pandemic. More people have now returned to traditional dining, and restrictions on indoor dining have gradually been loosened. Therefore, gifts that focus on dining out, such as certificates for favorite restaurants or wine bottle caddies for BYOB establishments, can make for great gifts.

## Support new hobbies

Many people took on new hobbies and explored new activities to pass the time during the pandemic. Encourage these hobbies by gifting tools and supplies. If a person adopted a new pet, try pet-toy subscriptions or even purchase pet health insurance.

Though the pandemic is something many people would love to forget, holiday shoppers can look to it for inspiration when buying gifts for loved ones this year.

*Story courtesy of Metro Creative Connection*



The 2021 holiday season figures to be especially jovial as the world continues to emerge from the pandemic.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Decorating for the holidays can be made even more special when decorations are handmade creations families can cherish for years to come.

## HOLIDAY FUN

# 3 holiday crafts families can make together

Decorating for the holidays can be made even more special when decorations are handmade creations families can cherish for years to come. Holiday crafting is an enjoyable way to pass some time and create lasting holiday traditions and memories. The following are some crafts families can make together.

## Personalized elf

For families who want to make their own personalized elf dolls, all it takes is a little computer knowledge, some clever photo work and a some sewing skills. Find a template for a rag doll sewing pattern or an illustration of an elf online.

Superimpose an image of your child's face on the template in a photo editing program. Print out the entire image onto iron-on fabric transfer paper. Iron it on to a light-colored piece of fabric from the craft store according to the product directions. Cut out the fabric with ironed-on decal, leaving about a one-inch margin to allow for sewing and eventual stuffing. Duplicate the shape of the doll onto another piece of fabric to make the back of the elf doll. Place the front elf image face down on the back piece of fabric and sew the edges together, leaving a small opening at the end.

Using that opening, flip the elf right-side out and stuff with pillow fill material. Sew the small opening closed and enjoy a personalized elf doll for the holidays.

## Holiday candle

This craft is attractive and also smells good. Gather one bar of fragrant soap (like Irish spring); a small, white washcloth; red and green ribbon; a round of colorful mesh or tulle fabric measuring roughly 12 inches or



Holiday crafting is an enjoyable way to pass some time and create lasting holiday traditions and memories.

enough to wrap your bar of soap; craft glue; a piece of yellow felt cut to look like a flame; and one or two sewing pins. Roll the washcloth into a cylinder shape to serve as the "wick" of the candle.

Glue the edges together and wrap a piece of ribbon diagonally around the

wick and adhere to secure even further. Glue the felt flame to the top of the wick. Place the soap in the center of the round piece of fabric. Attach the wick vertically to the soap using the pins. Then gather the tops of the mesh fabric around the base of the wick and use another

piece of ribbon to tie into a bow and secure the fabric to the wick base. The soap and pins should now be concealed. Place the "candle" out of direct sunlight and away from heat, preferably on a little dish so the soap will not damage any furniture.

## Growth indicator ornament

Purchase a large glass or plastic Christmas tree ball. Select an acrylic paint in your color of choice and squirt some into a paper plate. Have a child dip his or her hand into the paint

and then transfer the handprint to the ornament. Let dry and then attach a ribbon to hang on the tree. Through the years see how much children have grown from that little handprint.

*Story courtesy of Metro Creative Connection*



A holiday feast is the perfect time to create a special atmosphere.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

## ENTERTAINING

# Elevate holiday cooking with quick and easy tweaks

Holiday cooking and entertaining don't have to be overly complex to impress. Here are quick, simple ways to elevate your meals for memorable experiences your friends and family will love:

## Balanced seasoning

Are your go-to family recipes in need of an update? Enhance the flavor profile of savory holiday dishes by swapping out salt and pepper and instead, reaching for Livia's Seasoning Salt, an all-natural, pre-blended seasoning of kosher salt, coarse-ground black pepper and garlic.

"Livia's is good on just about everything, which is why it's the not-so-secret ingredient in a lot my creations," says Peter Hoff, executive chef and partner, NOLO's Kitchen & Bar.

You can use Livia's in a number of ways during meal preparation and table-side to give holiday dishes something extra:

- Add flair to appetizers by shaking it into the yolk mixture of deviled eggs or using it to season baked brie.
- Season the outside of your turkey with olive oil and a few liberal shakes of Livia's, or even create your own brine that will become a treasured recipe of its own.
- Season hams and roasts with it.
- Add it to stuffing and mashed potatoes.
- Update morning egg bake recipes to wow overnight guests.
- Include it on your holiday table so that guests can season their food to taste.

For more information, visit [liviaseasoningsalt.com](http://liviaseasoningsalt.com).

## Add pizzazz to desserts

With a few updates, you can give your standard



You don't need to overhaul your entire menu to make your holiday feast special.

dessert line-up a touch of elegance. Use fresh ginger in your gingerbread cookies. Create your own crumbs for sprinkling on top of cakes. Garnish slices of pie with a mint or basil sprig or a cinna-

mon stick. Melt your favorite chocolate and drizzle it on anything.

## Up your tablescape game

A holiday feast is the per-

fect time to create a special atmosphere. And you can do so easily by breaking out your best dishes and utensils, as well as by adding a few natural elements to the tablescape, such as poinsettias, holly,

evergreens and pinecones. Ditch the overhead lights and use candles or other warm lighting to create a soft, convivial glow.

You don't need to overhaul your entire menu to make your holiday feast

special. Make quick, simple tweaks and additions to your existing recipes and entertaining traditions to elevate the occasion.

*Story courtesy of StatePoint Media*



A quality set of mixing bowls is a must for any baking, cooking, prep or storage.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

## ENTERTAINING

# Must-haves for holiday baking and entertaining

Whether you're a beginning baker or an experienced entertainer, having the right tools can make the process of holiday party prep faster, easier, more festive — and ensure you can achieve expert-level results. Here are a few must-haves to add to your holiday shopping list.

## Spatulas that make you smile

From cookie batters to mashed potatoes, everyone needs a quality spatula to whip up their favorite holiday dishes. And now you can have both fun and function with Tovolo Spatulart Spatulas featuring double-sided holiday designs and puns. With a nylon core, these high-quality spatulas provide strength for the heaviest mixing jobs, silicone edges that remain flexible for easy scraping, and an FSC-certified wood handle. They're the perfect environmentally conscious way to add a tremendous tool with a touch of whimsy to the kitchen roster.

## Mix without the mess

A quality set of mixing bowls is a must for any baking, cooking, prep or storage. While there are many types of bowl sets, stainless steel is ideal for its durability and lightweight design. Choose a set that offers nesting, for easy and efficient cupboard storage; lids to keep foods fresh; deep sides to avoid messes; and a rolled lip for easy pouring.

## Basics for better baking

Move over parchment paper—serious bakers know the key to perfect baked goods is a quality baking mat. In addition to insulating your pan for even cooking and bak-



Having the right tools makes all the difference when you're whipping up culinary creations.

ing, baking mats protect your pans from baked-on food and grime and prevent sticking, without any paper waste. Additionally, they can double as a work surface featuring grid lines for cookie sizing and spacing, while also offering easy clean-up—just drop them in the dishwasher.

## Classy containers for clean up

Speaking of clean-up, disinfecting wipes have become a staple in most kitchens. Luckily, you can now store your wipes in style with Spectrum Decorative Disinfecting Wipe Containers. Available in four fashionable finishes to fit in

with any décor, the rust-resistant containers fit 35- to 75-80-count wipes packages and feature a push-button lid and non-slip bottom for easy one-handed access.

## Shape up your cocktails

Once your food menu is set, don't forget the bev-

verages. Create memorable cocktails and mocktails everyone will be talking about with uniquely shaped craft ice. Tovolo offers a variety of craft ice molds—from spheres and sports balls to novelty and holiday shapes. Requiring minimal prep, the easy-to-use molds stack in your freezer to save space and

will make you look like a master mixologist.

Having the right tools makes all the difference when you're whipping up culinary creations. Be sure to equip yourself right for a season of easy and festive holiday prep.

*Story courtesy of StatePoint Media*

## HOLIDAY SHOPPING

# Steer clear of knock-off toys this holiday season

In the scramble to get your hands on the toys your children want this holiday season, experts warn that you should prioritize safety by sticking to age-appropriate toys and by avoiding counterfeit alternatives at all costs.

“Illicit sellers of counterfeit toys may dupe parents into thinking they’re buying the real thing, or entice them with lower prices or the promise of getting the ‘hot toy’ of the holiday season,” says Joan Lawrence, The Toy Association’s “Toy Safety Mom” and senior vice president of standards and regulatory affairs. “What’s scary is that these illegitimate sellers are actually peddling fake and unsafe products that oftentimes don’t comply with product safety laws. That’s why we always urge parents to shop from reputable brands and sellers whose toys have been tested for compliance with over 100 different safety standards and tests required by law.”

With the shipping crisis predicted to have widespread impacts on the availability of this holiday season’s most popular toys, counterfeits are likely to be even more enticing. And new research conducted by OnePoll on behalf of The Toy Association suggests that consumers are not always as vigilant as they should be, with 65% of parents saying they would purchase knock-off/counterfeit toys if they couldn’t get their hands on the original item and 63% indicating they would buy counterfeits if they were cheaper. Indeed one in 10 parents are not even aware that counterfeit toys can be dangerous for kids to play with.

As you go about looking to snag a hot toy this holiday season, steer clear of counterfeit toys that are not



PHOTOS COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

As you go about looking to snag a hot toy this holiday season, steer clear of counterfeit toys that are not safe or appropriate for your child.

safe or appropriate for your child by following these tips from PlaySafe.org:

**1.** Shop only from reputable brands and sellers. Their toys have been tested for compliance with over 100 different safety standards and tests required by law.

**2.** Make sure the brand you’re purchasing from has a professional-looking website. Can’t find a website? That may be a

red flag that you are dealing with an illicit seller.

**3.** If a product’s reviews are negative, or if there aren’t many, it’s a clue the product could be a fake.

**4.** Poorly photographed pictures, typos, or spelling mistakes in the online description or packaging are other clues that the product could be illegitimate, and therefore unsafe.

**5.** Can’t find a toy on your child’s wish list? Wait for a trusted retailer to restock the product. Buying fake or cheaper alternatives is just not worth the risk.

In addition to avoiding knockoff toys, helping ensure your child’s safety during the gift-giving season also means shopping for toys only appropriate for their age. According to The Toy Association survey, 76% of parents read

age recommendations on toy packaging before purchasing. However, 40% admitted they view age labels on toys as suggestions instead of a warning, and 68% would give their child a toy recommended for older children. Be sure to follow age recommendations on toy packaging, which are not mere suggestions but firm recommendations made by safety experts that are based on childhood de-

velopmental stages.

For more safe shopping tips, visit [playsafe.org](https://playsafe.org), a premier toy safety resource site.

“With your vigilance, you can keep the merriest time of year happy, healthy and joyful by ensuring your child doesn’t unwrap a potential safety hazard,” says Lawrence.

*Story courtesy of StatePoint Media*



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Be sure to follow age recommendations on toy packaging, which are not mere suggestions but firm recommendations made by safety experts.



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

The following ideas can provide the inspiration shoppers need to put a smile on the face of fitness-minded friends and family members.

## HOLIDAY SHOPPING

# Gifts to excite the family athlete this holiday season

Holiday shoppers know that few things can match the joy of finding the perfect gift for a loved one. Whether that loved one is a tiny tot who can't wait to unwrap this year's must-have toy or an adult hoping to find the latest gadget under the tree on Christmas morning, the thrill of giving a great gift is part of what makes the holiday season so enjoyable.

Friends and family members may fall into certain categories, and that can make holiday shopping a little easier. For example, loved ones who can't wait to sit down with a good book would no doubt appreciate a new e-reader or the latest bestseller. When it comes to gifting the family athlete, the following ideas can provide the inspiration shoppers need to put a smile on the face of fitness-minded friends and family members.

## Weighted vest

Weighted vests have gained popularity in recent years. Available from a variety of manufacturers and for athletes of varying skill levels, weighted vests can be ideal for athletes who want to burn more calories and build strength during their workouts. This can be an especially useful gift for endurance athletes who want their training sessions to mimic the challenges posed by nature or difficult competitive terrains.

## Noise-canceling headphones or earbuds

Many athletes relish their workouts not only as opportunities to zero in on their fitness goals, but also as chances to block out distractions and clear their heads for an hour or two each day. Noise-cancelling headphones or earbuds ef-



Home gym equipment can make for a great gift this holiday season.

fectively block out external noises, allowing athletes to direct all of their focus on their workouts and training sessions.

## Energy drinks

Though it might not seem like the most exciting gift to unwrap on Christmas morning, energy

drinks are vital to many fitness enthusiasts' athletic endeavors. For example, endurance athletes may appreciate a tub of Osmo Active Hydration Performance Drink Mix, which contains an optimal ratio of sucrose, glucose and electrolytes, helping athletes improve their endurance and power

while reducing instances of cramping and fatigue. Energy drinks make for a perfect stocking stuffer.

## Home gym equipment

Pandemic-related gym closures turned athletes into their own personal trainers, and some may not want to return to local fit-

ness facilities even now that they've safely reopened. Home gym equipment can help athletes continue to build their own private home gyms, making items like kettle bells, dumbbells, weight benches, and resistance bands great items to put under the tree this holiday season.

It's never been easier to shop for the family athlete during the holiday season. A heightened focus on fitness ensures there's something for every type of athlete on your holiday shopping list.

*Story courtesy of Metro Creative Connection*



The Kinara (candle holder) and the Mishumaa Samba (the seven candles) are symbolic of Kwanzaa.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

## HOLIDAY DECOR

# Decorative holiday symbols add to seasonal celebrations

Decorating homes and other spaces is a major component of the holiday season. Holiday decorations often reflect celebrants' religious beliefs, and the following are some traditional holiday decor symbols for people of various faiths.

## Christmas tree

*Christian or secular Christmas symbol*

Few things evoke thoughts of Christmastime quite like a towering evergreen parked front and center in a home's picture window. Christmas trees are believed to date back to sixteenth century Germany. The custom ultimately arrived in America when the country welcomed an influx of German immigrants. It is widely believed that various non-Christian cultures may have used evergreen plants indoors in celebration of the winter solstice, which suggests Christmas trees may pre-date Christian symbolism.

## Menorah

*Jewish Chanukah symbol*

Menorahs are seven-armed candelabras used in Jewish religious worship. To mark the Chanukah celebration, a special nine-armed hanukiah is displayed for eight days and nights. A candle is lit each day to commemorate the miracle of oil lasting in the rededicated Temple after the Maccabees' successful uprising against the Syrian Greeks. The menorah typically is placed in a highly visible spot, such as the front window of a home or in a high-traffic living space.

## Advent wreath

*Roman Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran, among others, Christian symbol*

The Advent wreath is used by various Christian denominations and draws attention to the weeks preceding Christmas. A new candle is lit on the wreath each Sunday at mass to prepare the faithful to receive the Lord Jesus.

**Baby New Year is a popular promotional symbol used to commemorate the dawn of a new year.**

## Kinara and Mishumaa

*Saba Kwanzaa cultural symbol*

The Kinara (candle holder) and the Mishumaa Samba (the seven candles) are symbolic of Kwanzaa. The candles and holder represent the Seven Principles, or the minimum set of values by which African people are urged to live.

## Baby New Year

*Secular symbol*

Baby New Year is a popular promotional symbol used to commemorate the dawn of a new year. The baby represents rebirth and may be traced back to the ancient Greeks or Egyptians. Historians say the Greeks believed that their god of wine, Dionysus, was reborn on New Year's Day as the spirit of fertility. While people may not decorate with Baby New Year figurines, they do participate in "First Baby" competitions, which celebrate those infants born in the opening moments of a new year.

## Nativity scene

*Christian Christmas symbol*

It's customary for nativity scenes to be included in Christmas decor schemes. The nativity depicts the birth of Christ and typically includes a manger, Mary, Joseph, shepherds, various animals, an angel, and the three visiting Magi. The infant Jesus also is included, though some people prefer to wait until the after the stroke of midnight on Christmas Eve to place Jesus in the manger. Live nativity scenes also are commonplace around Christmas. Saint Francis of Assisi is credited with creating the first live nativity scene in 1223.

*Story courtesy of Metro Creative Connection*



Decorating homes and other spaces is a major component of the holiday season.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Chanukah is an ideal opportunity for Jewish family members to gather under one roof.

## HOLIDAY TRADITIONS

# Make Chanukah special with these iconic traditions

For eight nights each winter, candles burn in commemoration of a miraculous and joyous event. Chanukah, often referred to as the Festival of Lights, commemorates an ancient miracle that occurred after the Jewish people waged a hard-fought battle against religious oppression.

A small contingent of Jewish warriors led by Judah Maccabee rebelled against Syrian Greek rulers who desecrated the holy Second Temple in Jerusalem and tortured and persecuted those who did not adopt their religious beliefs. After the Maccabees came out victorious, they set out to rededicate the Temple, which included lighting a menorah. They could only find enough oil for the candelabra to burn for one night.

Miraculously, the oil burned for eight nights and the Temple was kept holy. This miracle is the inspiration for Chanukah.

Various iconic Chanukah traditions have been borne out of that evening in 164 BCE. Below are some of the most prominent traditions associated with Chanukah festivities.

## Lighting the menorah

The menorah is traditionally a seven-branched candelabra lit by ritually-pure olive oil used in Jewish places of worship. However, in commemoration of the Chanukah miracle, a special menorah, called a hanukiah, is used. This menorah is a nine-branched version that enables a candle to be lit for each day the rededicated Temple candles burned. The middle, highest candle from which the others are lit is called she shamash. The hanukiah is traditionally placed in a visible space, such as the front window of celebrants' homes.

## Playing with the dreidel

Jews were forbidden from

studying their own religious texts like the Torah, but they found ways to do so anyway. They would quickly hide their books and take out spinning tops to pretend to be playing with them when the Greeks were watching. In commemoration, these little tops, or dreidels, are taken out on Chanukah. The dreidels are marked with four Hebrew letters, which represent the phrase "nes gadol haya sham," or "a great miracle happened there."

## Eating fried foods

Frying foods in olive oil has become tradition and a way to acknowledge the miraculous Temple oil burning. Jelly-filled doughnuts called "sufganiyot" are popular, as are latkes, which are fried potato pancakes.

## Donations and gifts

In addition to Chanukah gelt (small chocolate coins) and money given out to children and adults, many Jewish families make "tzedakah" (donations) to nonprofits and other charitable organizations during Chanukah. The sixth night of Chanukah has recently become associated with charitable giving and other gifting.

## Family time

In addition to these traditions, Chanukah is an ideal opportunity for Jewish family members to gather under one roof. It also may be an opportunity for them to share their celebrations and religious customs with non-Jewish friends.

Chanukah is a celebratory time that looks back to a significant miracle in Jewish history. It's an opportunity to engage in many different traditions with family and friends.

*Story courtesy of Metro Creative Connection*



The dreidels are marked with four Hebrew letters, which represent the phrase "nes gadol haya sham," or "a great miracle happened there."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

There are a handful of ways for holiday celebrants to help their trees maintain that undeniable appeal for the long haul.

## HOLIDAY DECOR

# Tips to keep your tree fresh this holiday season

Christmas trees are often the pièce de résistance of holiday decor. Few things draw the attention of holiday guests quite like an awe-inspiring Christmas tree, especially when that tree maintains its fresh, healthy sheen throughout December.

Many families purchase fresh trees over Thanksgiving weekend or during the first weekend of December. Though the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas Day may seem like a long time to keep a tree looking great, there are a handful of ways for holiday celebrants to help their trees maintain that undeniable appeal for the long haul.

### Pick the right tree

Choosing the right tree is one of the simplest ways to keep a tree looking good throughout the holiday season. A freshly cut tree that buyers choose and cut down themselves or have cut down can reassure them that the tree is likely to stay strong throughout December. Trees purchased from a tree lot may have been cut down long before they made it to the lot, which can make it harder to keep them looking good until Christmas Day.

### Cut an inch off the base of any tree that is not freshly cut

MSU Extension at Michigan State University notes that all Christmas trees are conifers, which means they have resin canals in their trunks. Once a tree is cut, the resin can block the pores and make it harder for the tree to take in water. Cutting an inch off the base of a tree that

was not freshly cut just before putting it in the stand can help ensure it gets the water it needs to stay healthy and firm. MSU Extension notes that this approach should be taken with any tree that was not cut within six to eight hours of being put in a stand.

### Replenish the water supply every day

Fresh tree veterans recognize that Christmas trees can be very thirsty, especially within the first week or so of being cut and brought home. Fill the stand with water each morning and, if necessary, refill it each night before going to bed. The more water a tree gets and drinks, the more likely it is that the tree will look healthy all the way to Christmas Day. MSU Extension notes that many decorative or antique tree stands do not hold much water, so anyone with such a stand may need to replenish the water supply more than once or twice per day.

### Keep the tree away from a heat source

For safety's sake, trees should be kept away from heating vents, fireplaces and space heaters. But keeping trees away from such heat sources, and ensuring they are not spending the daytime in direct sunlight, also decreases the chances they will dry out before Christmas Day.

A handful of simple strategies can help holiday celebrants keep their Christmas trees looking good throughout the month of December.

*Story courtesy of Metro Creative Connection*



Choosing the right tree is one of the simplest ways to keep a tree looking good throughout the holiday season.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

A day spent making homemade ornaments is a great way to spend quality time together as a family during the holiday season.

## HOLIDAY DECOR

# Deck the halls with DIY decor

Decorating is one of the joys of the holiday season. Families often decorate together, and such traditions may include dressing the Christmas tree and hanging holiday lights around the house.

A day spent making homemade ornaments is another great way to decorate and spend quality time together as a family during the holiday season. Though families can let their imaginations run wild when making ornaments at home, the following are some great starting points that can serve as springboards for holiday crafting sessions.

## Snowmen

The holiday season simply wouldn't be the same without snowmen. Homemade snowmen can be made out of ping pong balls, which are the ideal size when making ornaments for the Christmas tree. Those who want to go a little bigger can glue wiffle balls or large polystyrene balls together or create their own papier mâché snowmen to display on mantles or on console tables in a foyer or hallway.

## Santa Claus

Another staple of holiday decor, Santa Claus has inspired many a DIY holiday ornament over the years. A paper plate Santa Claus with a cotton ball beard glued on can make for a fun Christmas craft, especially for young children who can't wait for the big guy to appear on Christmas Eve.

## Penguins

Though they might not have a direct link to the

holiday season, penguins evoke feelings of cold weather, making them an ideal addition to holiday decor schemes. Make your own penguin family using polystyrene craft balls in assorted sizes and then hang them on the tree or place them around the house.

## Reindeer

Santa would not be able to get the job done each Christmas Eve without his trustworthy team of reindeer. Popsicle stick reindeer projects can be fun for kids of all ages and a great way for youngsters to recognize the efforts of Dasher, Dancer, Comet, Cupid, and, of course, Rudolph, among others.

## Cookie cutters

Family baking sessions are a holiday tradition for millions of people. Though that often leads to batches upon batches of tasty cookies, it also means families tend to have a surplus of holiday cookie cutters around the house.

Surplus cookie cutters tend to be discarded or relegated to the miscellaneous items drawer in kitchens, but a more awe-inspiring fate can await them. A coat of paint, some glitter and a little bit of string or twine is all families need to transform their extra cookie cutters into colorful tree ornaments.

Holiday decorating sessions can be made even more fun when families take time to craft some DIY decorations together.

*Story courtesy of Metro Creative Connection*



The holiday season simply wouldn't be the same without snowmen.



Surplus cookie cutters tend to be discarded or relegated to the miscellaneous items drawer in kitchens, but a more awe-inspiring fate can await them.



All the leaves have probably fallen by now, so it's time to clean out gutters and downspouts.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

## HOME MAINTENANCE

# 9 home maintenance tasks for your November to-do list

By Jeanne Huber  
*The Washington Post*

Cooler weather is here to stay for a while, except in the southernmost parts of the country. But in most places, there are still a few wonderful fall days to come when you can get outside and accomplish something useful. Even if it's chilly, think of the damage to your home that you're preventing — and think about how cozy it will be when you get back inside.

Here are nine home maintenance tasks you should take care of in November.

## 1. Clean gutters and downspouts

All the leaves have probably fallen by now, so it's time. Clogged gutters and downspouts prevent rain and melting snow from draining safely away, and they let water wick up underneath the roofing, causing the trim boards or even roof sheathing to rot. If you have a multistory house, are on a slope or aren't comfortable working on a ladder, hire a gutter-cleaning company. Make sure anyone you hire has insurance. If you have a one-story house and are comfortable working on a ladder, you can probably do the work in an hour or two. Plant the ladder firmly on the ground, and make sure it isn't tipped sideways. Start at the end farthest from the downspout, so any leaves over the downspout can keep more debris from flowing into it as you clean. If you can't get a ladder close to a section, perhaps because a shrub is in the way, get a stick to extend your reach. Use it to pull leaves toward you. Don't fling the

debris onto the ground; dump the bits into a bucket, so you don't have to clean up later. If necessary, disassemble downspouts to clean them.

## 2. Check exterior handrails and steps

With daylight saving time ending the first Sunday of November and the days growing shorter, people will be frequently coming and going from your house in the dark. That, combined with slippery surfaces in damp weather, increases the chances of people falling. Make sure exterior handrails are secured and easy to use. Bigger screws might be enough to tighten a wobbly connection between a rail and its support brackets. If the rail is splintered, sand it smooth or replace it; it's probably too late in the season to paint. Prune shrubs that cascade over handrails. If steps are slippery, consider adding traction tape, which has sandpaper-like grit on top. Some types come with a reflective strip — a safety bonus. Adhesive-backed products generally need to be applied to a clean, dry surface, which can be difficult to achieve in rainy weather. Create a temporary plastic cover, or buy a product without an adhesive, such as Grip-Strip's screw-down strips (\$54.95 for eight 32-by-2-inch strips on Amazon).

## 3. Improve outdoor lighting

Ensure that walkways are safely lit. Solar lights with built-in battery-charging panels require no wiring, so they are simple to install. They work even in winter if they get

enough sunlight — but that can be a big "if" when the days are short and cold weather makes the batteries operate less efficiently. Especially on the shady side of a house or in areas where winter skies are often cloudy, outdoor LED string lights can be a better solution, provided you have an outlet nearby. Before you shop, measure the distance you need. If a single string isn't long enough, buy ones that can be linked. The maximum run of linked strings depends on the wire thickness. Commercial-grade strings have thicker wire than those typically sold for holiday decorations, and that thicker wire means they can deliver power to more lights over longer distances.

## 4. Clean carpets

Don't settle for having to look at dirty carpets while you're indoors this winter. Carpet cleaners available for rent at grocery stores and home centers aren't as powerful as the equipment professionals use, but they can make a huge improvement — and the price is right. Home Depot charges \$26 for four hours or \$37 for a full day, plus cleaning solution. Be careful to follow the directions so you don't drench your carpet. A professional cleaning averages about \$177, according to a 2021 update on [angi.com](https://www.angi.com), a website that links consumers and service providers. Rather than paying every time you want your carpets cleaned, consider buying your own machine, which could run from around \$100 to more than \$400, depending on the model. The nonprofit magazine Consumer Reports rated the

Bissell ProHeat 2X Lift-Off Pet 15651 (\$308.99, [bissell.com](https://www.bissell.com)) as its top model, but nearly as good was the lightweight Hoover PowerDash Pet FH50700 (\$99.99, Amazon). One suggestion, though: Don't rush to clean carpets because visitors, especially those with pets or young children, will arrive in a few days. Clean after they leave, when you can enjoy the results for a while.

## 5. Insulate pipes

If you have bare water pipes running through your crawl space, attic, basement or other accessible place, this is a good time to insulate them. Besides helping to prevent freezing, which could cause the pipes to burst, insulation keeps the water in hot-water lines hotter and helps prevent condensation on cold-water lines in the summer. Hardware stores and home centers sell foam tubes that are easy to install. Measure the diameter of your pipes before you shop. To install, just open the lengthwise slit on the tube and slip it over the pipe. If there is a crease but no slit, carefully cut along the crease first. Some types come with tape attached to seal over the slit once the tube is in place. Where necessary, cut the foam to length with scissors.

## 6. Inspect gaskets on wood stoves and fireplace inserts

If you burn wood, you probably know to have a certified chimney sweeper clean the chimney and inspect the fireplace annually. If you have a fireplace insert or a wood stove, also check the gasket around the door. If it's frayed or loose, replace it when the fireplace

is cold. Take the old piece with you to a hardware store or fireplace shop, so you can buy replacement cords of the same diameter. Also get a container of the cement that holds the gasket in place. Chip out the gunk before you install the new piece.

## 7. Clean the hearth

Wood fires are gorgeous, but there's no denying the mess they create, and spilled embers that look as if they're out can ignite and cause a house fire. Clean up each time you add wood. Make this step easier by keeping a whisk broom and dust pan in an attractive basket near the fireplace. Empty the pan into the fire, which is safer than dumping stray embers into a wastebasket or vacuuming them up, where they could set a bag of collected dust on fire. If your fireplace has glass doors, keep a spray container of glass cleaner and a few old newspapers or paper towels in a kit and clean the glass before you start each fire.

## 8. Clean and stow your mower

Sure, you could have done this earlier, because the lawn probably stopped growing much as the days grew shorter. But if you used your mower to chop up fallen leaves, November is the month to call it quits. Plug-in electric mowers just need cleaning. Turn the mower on its side to remove leaves matted around the blade, and wipe off the exterior. If you have an electric mower with a rechargeable battery, store the mower (or just the battery, if it's removable) where the temperature stays within the range the manufacturer recommends, usually 40 to 80 degrees. Check the manual or look

online to see whether your battery model should be recharged periodically while it's in storage. Gas mowers need protection against corrosion. Standard gasoline contains ethanol, which can gum up the motor and cause parts to rust if left in the machine all winter.

To prevent an expensive repair bill in the spring, some homeowners drain their mower of fuel. It's easier and probably better to mow until the motor runs out, then add fresh fuel with a quality fuel stabilizer. Let the machine run for about five minutes to make sure the stabilizer gets to the carburetor. If you opt to drain the tank, use the leftover fuel in a machine you'll use in the winter (make sure the suggested fuel mixtures match) or take it to a company that services small gasoline engines. For a fee, most will accept leftover fuel for appropriate disposal.

## 9. Clean or replace chair protectors

When people scoot chairs in and out over hardwood, tile, vinyl or linoleum, any grit under the chair legs functions like sandpaper and scratches the flooring. Eventually, the flooring needs to be refinished or replaced, which isn't cheap. Installing felt pads or other protectors on the base of chair legs helps, but only if the pads stay clean. Add protectors to any bare legs on scratch-prone floors. Where pads are installed but have grit embedded, brush or vacuum the surface. If sand or other material still sticks, replace the pads. Adhesive-backed pads are easiest to apply but are prone to coming loose on some chair legs. If that happens, get nail-on pads.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Many homeowners wonder whether remodeling their kitchen is worth the investment.

## HOME IMPROVEMENT

# Signs it is time to overhaul your kitchen

Remodeling a kitchen adds value to a home. Remodeling Magazine's "Cost vs. Value Report" indicates mid-range kitchen remodels cost about \$66,000, and homeowners can expect to recover about 60 to 80% of that cost at resale.

Homeowners may wonder if remodeling their kitchens is worth the investment. But homeowners should not just consider cost, but also the current conditions of their kitchens when deciding if a renovation project is the right move to make. These signs indicate it may be time to renovate a kitchen.

## Breakers are triggered

If the lights go dark from a tripped circuit breaker every

time you try to microwave and run the toaster oven at the same time, your wiring is likely not up to the task of handling the workload and could be out of date. A kitchen remodel will assess wiring load needs and an electric overhaul may be necessary.

## Lack of storage

One of the biggest hassles homeowners encounter in their kitchens is a lack of storage space. If making a meal involves a Jenga-like stacking and rearranging of kitchen tools, or if an avalanche occurs whenever you search for an item, you might need more storage. A carefully planned redesign can achieve this, even in a smaller kitchen.

## Outdated appliances

Even if your appliances are not avocado green or mustard yellow relics of the 1970s, they might still need to be replaced. According to CRD Design, appliances are only expected to last around 10 to 15 years. If appliances have become unsafe or energy hogs, it could be time for a remodel.

## Family is expanding (or shrinking)

Kitchens often are the heart of a home. They need to meet the needs of the family that resides in that home. A remodel can add space as needed. On the flip side, when a couple becomes empty

nesters, kitchens can be redesigned and downsized to reflect their new needs and desires, such as the addition of a wine chiller or espresso station.

## Poor lighting

Task lighting is essential in a kitchen, but older homes may not be equipped with lighting where it's most needed. A carefully designed remodel can improve lighting with under-cabinet lights, pendants, overhead lighting, and even natural light to make the space attractive and more functional.

## Frequent run-ins

The notion that you can have too many cooks in the kitchen

refers to having too many people trying to pitch in or offer their opinions. However, it also can apply to when too many people are gathering in a small space. Redesigning a kitchen can improve the efficiency of a space and make the room feel larger.

## Aesthetic appeal

Many kitchen remodels have been inspired by unsightly kitchens. Cosmetic changes can lead to big improvements.

Kitchen renovations can add instant appeal and help address issues that tend to plague outdated rooms.

*Story courtesy of Metro Creative Connection*



Kitchens often are the heart of a home. They need to meet the needs of the family that resides in that home.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Homeowners do not have to invest a lot of money in renovations to give their dining spaces awe-inspiring makeovers.

## HOME IMPROVEMENT

# Budget-friendly dining room renovation ideas

If the kitchen is the heart of the home, then the dining room may be akin to one of its arteries. The mood created in the kitchen spreads to the dining space where family and friends gather to eat and enjoy one another's company.

Dining rooms can get lost in the home renovation shuffle, as many homeowners tend to focus on renovating kitchens and bathrooms instead. Homeowners do not have to invest a lot of money in renovations to give their dining spaces awe-inspiring makeovers. Here's how to do so on a budget.

## Lighten and brighten

Dining rooms were once very

formal spaces. Dark woods, large pieces of furniture, over-the-top chandeliers, and other details could be found in many homes. But now that houses are being built with open floor plans, dining rooms can blend with other spaces, which have moved to lighter colored walls, flooring and furniture. A fresh coat of vibrant paint can work wonders and it doesn't cost much. If you can't remove a floor, cover it with a brightly colored area rug.

## Switch things up with slipcovers

Slipcovers can be changed each

season to dramatically alter the look of a dining room for little investment. Slip covers also protect chairs and can be easily laundered after spills. ■ Add floating shelving. Floating shelves provide much-needed storage or display space without the need to invest in another piece of furniture. Depending on the shelving, they can work in modern design schemes or even farmhouse dining spaces.

## Clear out the clutter

It might be time to say "so long" to that large curio cabinet and the knickknacks within it. Curio and china cabinets used to be de rigueur, but plenty of people now

prefer more open and airy dining rooms. For those who want to keep the cabinet, try decluttering inside to only include the very best display pieces and see if the cabinet can be refinished with paint or a lightly colored stain.

## Improve lighting

Make the chandelier the statement piece of the space. Go for a bold color or an innovative design. Then add accessories throughout the space that coordinate with the chandelier.

## Add bench seating

Those who need additional seating may not have to get entirely

new furniture. Swap out some chairs for benches, which can fit a couple more guests than chairs.

## Create depth with color

HGTV says that using various shades of the same color in a space can add depth. Coordinate drapes, walls, seat fabrics, and accessories for a cohesive design. Renovating a dining room doesn't require a large investment of time and money. A few simple steps can give dining spaces a whole new feel without busting homeowners' budgets.

*Story courtesy of Metro Creative Connection*





PHOTOS COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

A little extra effort this fall can make your home more enjoyable all winter long.

## HOME MAINTENANCE

# 5 ways to prepare your home for winter

It's that time of year: pumpkin spice is here and so are shorter days and cooler nights. Before nightfall comes too early, take advantage of the milder temps to prepare your home for winter. Here are a few easy, DIY tasks to check off your list.

## 1. Close up the patio

It's important to protect patio items from winter wear and tear so you can enjoy them as soon as the weather breaks in the spring.

When the weather in your area seems to be changing for good, clean outdoor furniture like tables, chairs and décor and protect them with a heavy-duty cover. If you don't have interior storage, secure everything tightly so you don't risk items tipping during a gusty winter storm. Clean the grill, remove and store the tank, and winterize outdoor hoses and faucets. Easy-to-install faucet covers can help prevent water damage and freezing pipes.

Also, don't forget to plant your bulbs now so you'll have flowers to welcome you when the warm weather hits.

## 2. Secure loose shingles and fix broken gutters

Assess your roof and gutters to ensure your home is safe from water damage and leaks this winter. If you suspect or discover a problem, even a small one, don't wait to fix it. It will be even more difficult to repair after the roof has become snowy and icy.

If it's not within budget, try a DIY fix with supplies you likely already have in your toolbox. The Original Duck Tape Brand Duct Tape is a classic tool for temporary repairs and is great for holding, seaming and sealing coverings over problematic areas until you can later fix the issue at hand.

## 3. Prep A/C units

Don't overlook keeping your A/C unit clean. Most modern units are created to withstand extreme elements; however, keeping it free of buildup is key to maintaining it over time.

When it's not in use over winter, clean the surfaces on and around the unit to keep it free from buildup of dander, leaves, acorns and pine needles. Next, using an air conditioner cover, securely protect your A/C unit from snow and ice, so that it's still in its best working condition when you uncover it in the spring.

## 4. Keep cold weather out

Frigid temperatures draw attention to drafts coming into your home. While turning up the furnace helps, the constant escape of warm air leads to high heating costs.

Seal cracks and gaps around windows and doors wisely. Many seals tend to freeze and crack, never really fixing the problem. However, Duck Brand Heavy-Duty Weatherstrip Seals are made with a durable, flexible material, creating a barrier against cold air throughout the winter. When spring arrives, the strip will work against dust, pollen and insects throughout the warmer months.

## 5. Clean windows

Prepare your home for short gloomy days and long nights by giving windows and blinds a deep clean. When these surfaces are clean, natural light can pour in during the day, helping combat winter blues.

For more tips, visit [DuckBrand.com](https://DuckBrand.com).

A little extra effort this fall can make your home more enjoyable all winter long.

*Story courtesy of StatePoint Media*



Assess your roof and gutters to ensure your home is safe from water damage and leaks this winter.

## HOME MAINTENANCE

# How to maintain hardwood floors

Hardwood floors have long been sought after by home buyers. In its 2019 “Remodeling Impact Report,” the National Association of Realtors® revealed that new wood flooring was the fourth most popular project to attract buyers.

Of course, hardwood floors aren’t just for buyers. Homeowners who already have hardwood floors know just how impressive these floors can be, especially when they’re well maintained. Maintaining wood floors is not necessarily as straightforward as it may seem, and homeowners may benefit from a tutorial on how to keep the floors under their feet looking good.

## To polish or not to polish?

Polishing floors is an inexpensive way to keep them looking good. But the home improvement experts at Bob-Vila.com note that not all floors can be polished, and determining which ones can depends on the finish. Floors with waterproof barriers such as urethane will benefit from routine polishing. However, floors with penetrating finishes like tung oil will need to be waxed rather than polished.

## What finish is on the floor?

The Hardwood Distributor’s Association recommends a simple way for homeowners to determine which type of finish is on their hardwood floors. Homeowners are advised to rub a finger across the floor.

If no smudge appears, then the floor is surface sealed. If a smudge is created, then the floor has been treated with a penetrating seal. The HDA also notes that recently installed wood floors are likely surface sealed.

## How often should floors be polished or waxed?

Wood flooring professionals recommend polishing floors that can be polished once every few months. Waxing wood floors does not need to be done as frequently, and most can benefit from a fresh coat of wax every 12 to 18 months.

## What can I do on a daily basis?

Some simple tricks and daily maintenance can help wood floors maintain their impressive look.

- Utilize floor mats. The HDA notes that floor mats near entryways can reduce the time it takes to clean hardwood floors and reduce the wear and tear they endure. For example, tiny particles like dirt can scratch the floor and contribute to the kind of minor damage that adds up to significant scarring over time. Floor mats near entryways ensures that most of that dirt never makes it to the wood floors.

- Vacuum without a beater bar. Some vacuums contain beater bars, which are designed to pick up human hair, dog hair and other things that conventional vacuums may not be able to pick up. The HDA advises vacu-

**Wood flooring professionals recommend polishing floors that can be polished once every few months. Waxing wood floors does not need to be done as frequently, and most can benefit from a fresh coat of wax every 12 to 18 months.**

uming without the beater bar, as it can contribute to small scratches in the floor. Sweeping with a high-quality broom or microfiber cloth is another way to pick up dirt without damaging floors.

- Use manufacturer-recommended cleaning products. Local home improvement stores sell a host of hardwood floor cleaning products, but the HDA notes that many flooring manufacturers now sell their own hardwood floor cleaners designed specifically for their floors. These products are likely homeowners’ best bets. Homeowners who can’t find them can seek recommendations from a local flooring retailer.

Hardwood floors are attractive for many reasons. And they look even more stunning, and last much longer, when homeowners make an effort to maintain them.

*Story courtesy of Metro Creative Connection*



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Polishing floors is an inexpensive way to keep them looking good.