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gifts &

LIFESTYLE

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How to Master Shopping Early for the Holidays

“The early bird gets the worm” is a well-known English proverb that historians trace all the way back to the 1600s. Though the words might first have been popularized hundreds of years ago, they remain as true today as they were then, particularly in regard to holiday shopping. Savvy shoppers have long touted the importance of starting early when looking for holiday gifts for loved ones. Seasoned procrastinators may never embrace early shopping, but others who want to a less hectic holiday shopping season can consider these tips.

- Begin with a plan. Holiday shopping excursions, whether they take place in town, at the mall or online, can take longer than expected when shoppers have no idea what they’re looking for. Prior to your first holiday shopping trip, jot down gift ideas for each person on your list. Then scour stores or websites for those items. Starting early affords shoppers time to bargain hunt and ensures supply shortages or other issues won’t get in the way of a happy loved one come the holiday season.

- Recognize the notion of “early” has changed. Early holiday shopping used to be synonymous with the retail holiday Black Friday, which occurs the day after Thanksgiving in the United States. However, many holiday shoppers now begin buying gifts long before they’ve purchased a Thanksgiving turkey. In its 2022 Consumer Pulse Survey, McKinsey & Company found that 56 percent of consumers started their holiday shopping in October. A host of variables may have influenced that shift, but supply chain issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic have lingered, which undoubtedly compelled consumers to get an especially early start on holiday shopping. Shoppers who want to ensure everything arrives on time for the holiday season must recognize that “early” shopping now involves beginning around Halloween, if not earlier.



- Take the (local) road less traveled. Shopping local merchants in person is a strategy savvy shoppers have long since embraced, but it’s one that’s especially beneficial in an era marked by supply chain issues and inflation. Local merchants don’t have the overhead or sizable staffs of big box or chain stores, which enables them to keep costs low. And since local merchants produce many of their own products, it’s likely there’s something in store that shoppers will love and less likely that they will have issues filling orders. A late fall afternoon in a local shopping district can yield an array of treasures and help holiday shoppers find the right gift for many a person on their list.

- When in doubt, go gift card. If the right gift is proving elusive even when shopping early, shoppers should not hesitate to go the gift card route. Shoppers need not feel as though a gift card is a nonstarter, as a 2022 survey from the National Retail Federation found that 54 percent of survey respondents indicated gift cards were the most desirable gift of the holiday season. Shopping early is a great way to enjoy a less hectic holiday season. *metrocreativeconnection*

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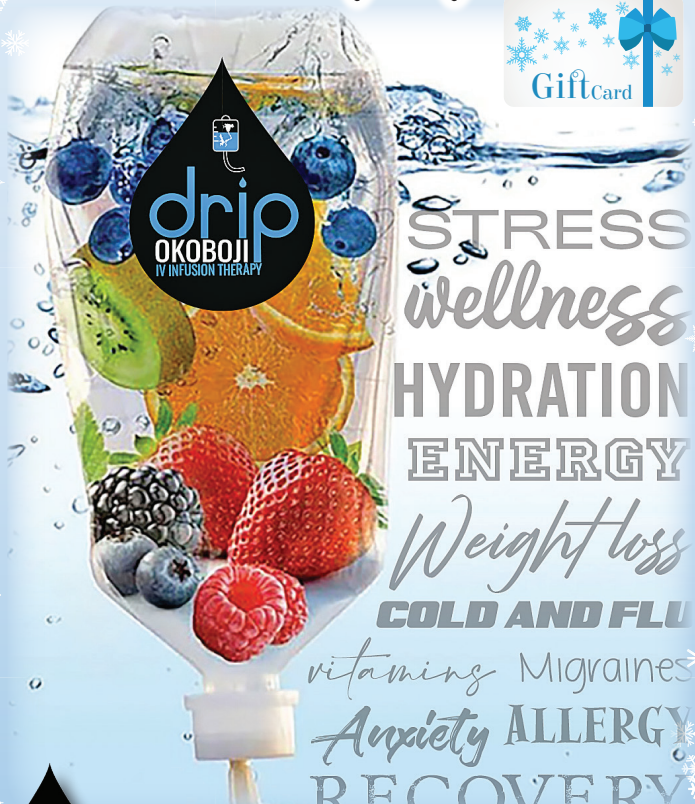
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Entertaining Options to Accommodate Late Arrivals



when late comers arrive. Simply say, “We knew you wouldn’t want us to wait for you.” Plus, if guests know exactly when food will be served, they can fortify themselves with snacks if they must be late.

- **Plan make-ahead dishes.** Some meals taste even better when they’ve been allowed to sit and the flavors meld. These include quiches, layered pasta dishes, casseroles, and even stews. Incorporate them into holiday entertaining plans, and then you can reheat as needed prior to dinner being served.



- **Use the oven as a warmer.** Even something like a roast or turkey can be kept warm for some time without compromising on quality. Foods can typically be kept hot

In a perfect entertaining scenario, all guests arrive on time and food comes out of the oven at the ideal temperature. Even though holiday hosts can hope for the best, it’s a good idea to plan for instances when guests take liberties in regard to when they show up to dinner. People have their own interpretations of what qualifies as “on time.” For example, for an event that begins at 4 p.m., some guests may turn up at exactly 4 p.m., while others may arrive an hour or more later. According to etiquette expert Miss Manners, ordinarily it is understood that dinner is served roughly a half hour after the stated invitation time. While it’s frustrating for hosts doing a culinary balancing act when guests do not heed etiquette and show up on time, there are some ways to plan ahead for late arrivals.

in a preheated oven set to 200 F to 250 F. Even lower temperatures between 160 F and 170 F will keep food safe at an internal temperature of 140 F without it actually being cooked more. If it goes above 140 F, turn off the oven and then back on as needed.

- **Know your audience.** If you have perpetual late arrivals, you likely know who the culprits will be. Adjust their invitations so that their proposed arrival times are one hour earlier than the rest of the invitees.

- **Choose foods that cook quickly.** If you prefer to cook to order for guests, then have appetizers on hand to keep early guests satisfied. Then when everyone has arrived you can rely on fast-cooking items like steaks, chops and cutlets. Thin cuts of meats and poultry will take much less time to cook than briskets and roasts. Give them a holiday makeover with innovative flavors and impressive garnishes.

- **Shift accountability.** On the invitation, clearly state your desires with something such as, “Arrive at 3, dinner will be served at 5.” This gives guests a window of flexibility. Plus, you’ll be largely off the hook if the meal is already on the table

- **Consider catering.** Catering companies are masters at keeping food at the ready for guests. A buffet service will keep food hot in chafing dishes, which is perfect for a holiday party with an open door policy on arrival time.

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7 Ways to Organize & Store Holiday Decorations



Decorating a home for holidays is quite popular. A survey from the National Retail Federation found that 53 percent of respondents said they were planning to decorate their home or yard for Halloween in 2023. Lombardo Homes polled 1,000 Americans in 2021 and 94 percent said they celebrate Christmas in at least some way, and 84 percent said they decorate. According to Time2Play, which surveyed 1,000 Canadians about their holiday decorating habits, Manitoba puts up Christmas decor earlier

than any other province, with these residents taking out decorations 4.3 weeks ahead of Christmas Day on average. With so many avid holiday decorators, individuals will need to find ways to organize and store their seasonal items. Holiday decor comes in many different sizes — from the smallest tree ornaments to illuminated statues for the yard or inflatable items. Figuring out a storage plan can take a little effort. These seven tips can help.

1. Purchase clear, similarly sized storage bins and shelving racks, hang-

ing them where you plan to keep the decorations. Most people prefer an out-of-the-way spot, such as in the garage, attic or basement. Label each bin by holiday and put the bins in chronological order to make finding items more convenient. Uniform bin sizes make it easier to stack and store.

2. Store smaller items inside larger decor items. Decorative baskets or wrapped boxes brought out for Christmas or Chanukah are ideal places to keep smaller tchotchkes like ceramics, dreidels, candlestick holders, or

mantel hooks. Delicate items can be tucked into Christmas stockings or wrapped and stored in a fluffy tree skirt. Egg cartons can be used to keep small items safe as well.

3. Label everything so you will not need to dig through boxes or bins to know what is inside. This might be a good year to ask for a label maker for the holidays!

4. Use overhead or wall storage for holiday decor. Overhead spaces in the garage or basement walls can be good spaces to keep holiday decorations. Al-

ways keep bins and boxes off the floor so they are not vulnerable to damage related to leaks or floods.

5. Garment bags can protect larger decorations, such as wreaths, artificial trees or signs. If you have a large number of mechanical, illuminated or inflatable lawn ornaments, consider investing in a small shed where these items can be safely kept. Wrap the extension cords and any bracing stakes or strings used with the decorations so it's easy to find.

6. Utilize pieces of cardboard as well as toilet pa-

per or paper towel tubes to keep lights and wires tidy. Tuck cords into the toilet paper tubes, and wrap lights around the cardboard to avoid tangles.

7. Each year, take inventory of your decoration collection and toss out anything that is damaged or has seen better days. Storing holiday decorations will take some time, but once you establish a system, things will be simple year after year.

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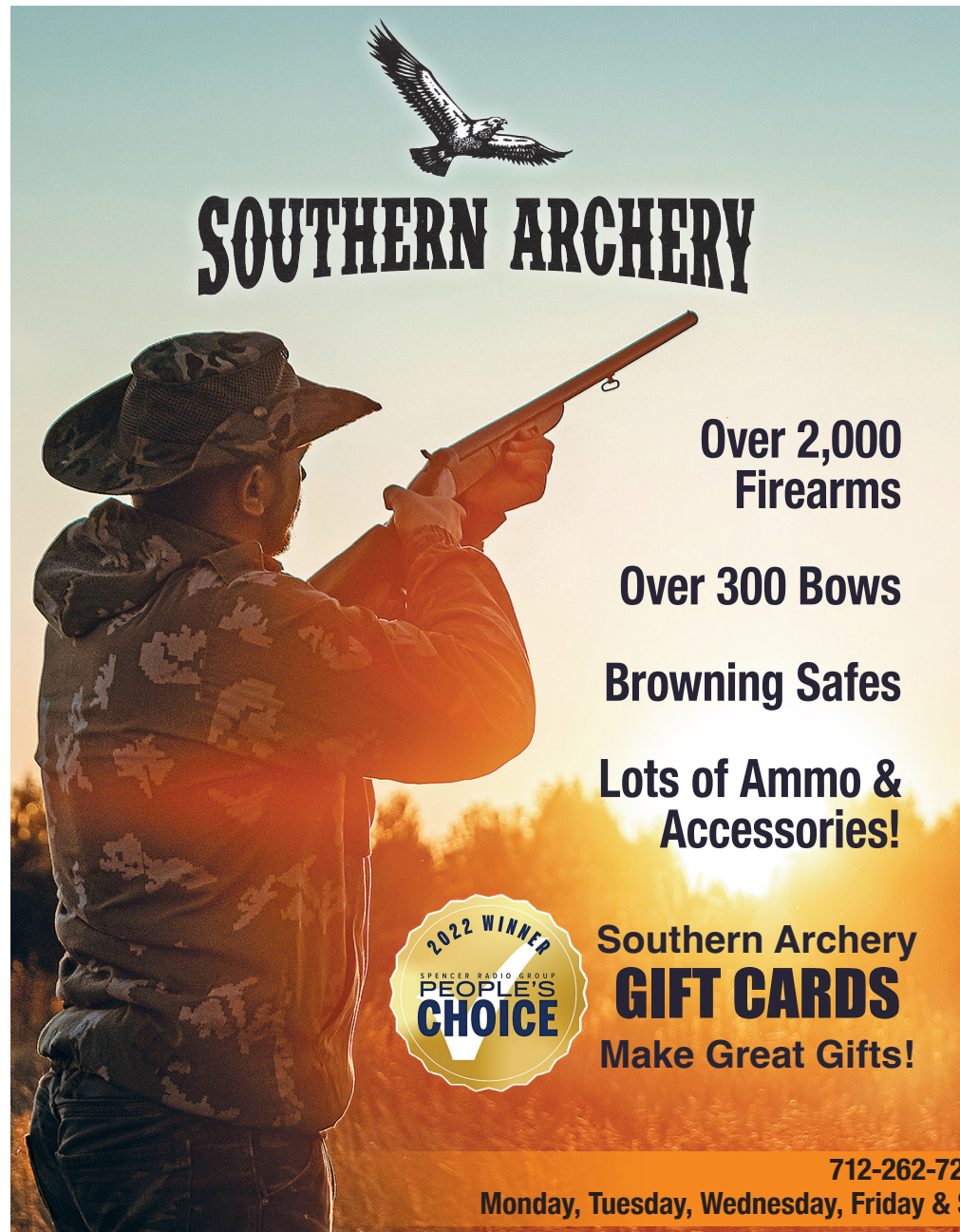
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know the best place in town to grab a bite or when a trendy new restaurant will open its doors. But such individuals also enjoy making meals at home, and the following gift ideas can make this holiday season more flavorful for the family foodie.

- **Tabletop firepit:** Shoppers who want to impress their food-loving loved one with something truly unique can give a tabletop firepit. Safe for indoor use, tabletop firepits enable s'mores-loving foodies to indulge in a traditionally summertime favorite all-year-round. Tabletop firepits are small enough to be stored on a kitchen countertop or in a cabinet. When in use, the s'mores-friendly accessory is smokeless, removing perhaps the lone disadvantage to making this beloved treat.

- **Club subscription:** Monthly subscriptions are a gift that can keep on giving all the way until next holiday season. Sweets lovers will undoubtedly appreciate receiving a box of fresh chocolates each month, while those with more unique tastes may anxiously await the day their monthly shipment of pickles arrives at their doorstep. The options are endless, ensuring there's a monthly subscription out there to tickle every foodie's fancy.

- **Sauce sampler:** Amateur sauciers may find inspiration in a sauce sampler set. Sampler set options abound, so shop-

pers can find something for foodies who love a spicy sauce, something more sweet or even in between. Of course, sampler sets also provide a range of sauces, making them ideal for foodies who want something spicy tonight before pivoting to a sweeter dish tomorrow. Flavored olive oil sampler sets also can be a great gift for cooks who love to experiment with new flavors.

- **Charcuterie board and knife set:** Foodies who love to host their fellow food fanatics will no doubt fall in love with a new charcuterie board and knife set. A 2023 report from Kroger revealed that the supermarket chain expected charcuterie boards to remain popular over the course of the year. That popularity makes sense, as anything from meat to cheese to fruit to crackers has a home on a charcuterie board, making the item especially appealing to foodies who routinely share their homes and love of food with friends and family.

- **Espresso maker:** Of course, foodies aren't just about food. Beverages also figure prominently in many foodies' lives. A high-end espresso maker can ground fresh beans and brew multiple cups in no time at all, making it an ideal addition to any foodie's culinary arsenal. Food is a vital component of the holiday season and can even be incorporated into holiday shopping.

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Food features prominently throughout the holiday season. Family meals around the holiday dinner table are a cherished tradition in millions of households, and food also plays a central role during seasonal gatherings with friends and colleagues. Food also can feature prominently throughout Chanukah and on Christmas Day, particularly if a loved one qualifies as a full-fledged foodie. Many families feature at least one foodie. Foodies always

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8 Easy Holiday Centerpiece Ideas



The holiday season is a great time to make any home a bit more merry and bright. Most individuals let their personalities show through their home decor, and holiday decorating is just as personal as decorating throughout the rest of the year. The main living areas of a home get the most decorating attention, with a Christmas tree or menorah taking a prominent position in the front window. Garlands, candles and other accoutrements also may dress up spaces. However, when it comes to holiday hosting, attention also should be given to the dining table — which can benefit from a festive centerpiece. Pre-made centerpieces are undeniably attractive, but adding a homespun touch can be a fun creative pursuit and become a family tradition. Explore these eight simple ideas to dress up your holiday table.

- 1. Frosted pine cones:** Take advantage of a crisp winter's day to venture into a forest or park that is rich with evergreen trees. Gather pine cones from the forest floor and, if possible, a few evergreen boughs. Give the pine cones a touch of winter whimsy with a little faux snow in a can or even white paint. Nestle the boughs and pine cones into a wide-mouthed vase or bowl in the center of the table. Individual pine cones can later be turned into place cards for seating guests.
 - 2. Holiday thanks:** Cut many strips of paper roughly 6 inches in length from various colored pieces of paper to match the holiday theme. When guests arrive, ask them to write a favorite holiday memory or two, or what they're thankful for. Twirl the paper strips around a pencil to curl them, and then place the curlicues into a decorative bowl in the center of the table. Later in the evening, the host or hostess can read some of the sentiments.
 - 3. Magical forest:** Use green and silver conical party hats to turn a table or sideboard into a veritable evergreen forest. Arrange them on a blanket of faux snow or white confetti.
 - 4. Freshly cut:** Select attractive flowers in vibrant holiday hues from a florist or even the supermarket floral section. Cut the stems and place them into an unusual display container, such as holiday themed mugs or a punch bowl.
 - 5. Glass baubles:** Who says ornaments should be exclusive to the tree? A crystal or glass cake stand can be transformed into an icy delight when topped with silver and clear glass ornaments.
 - 6. Birch wood:** The crisp white coloring of birch bark is right at home with holiday decor. Go stark with pieces of the cut wood in varying heights intermingled with white candles that mimic the shapes and scale of the wood.
 - 7. Fruit and vegetables:** If guests are coming over and the race is on for a fast centerpiece, look no further than the kitchen. Lemons, artichokes, pears, or pomegranates look festive in a bowl interspersed with some greenery and baby's breath.
 - 8. Cornucopia:** The horn of plenty can be customized to any holiday. Purchase a horn in wicker or woven grapevine and fill with flowers, fruit and greenery, or even painted gourds or miniature pumpkins.
- Holiday hosts and hostesses should not neglect the dining table when they decorate. Festive centerpieces can be handmade without much effort on the part of hosts.

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Fall & Winter Skincare Tips

As summer transitions to fall, many changes take place. In addition to changing landscapes, men and women may need to adapt their health and wellness habits to ensure that they stay healthy and happy. Part of that daily regimen includes how to care for skin as the seasons change.

Just as skin requires certain protection from the sun and heat in the summer, skin has special needs in the fall and winter. Fall and winter are often characterized by cold, dry weather, which can make these times of year particularly challenging for people with dry or sensitive skin. These tips can help people maintain their skin's appearance and health.

- Don't skip the sunscreen. Sunscreen is not a summer-only requirement. UV rays can damage the skin any time of year, even if the rays are not as strong as during the summer. UV radiation accelerates and increases the risk of skin cancer. It also can lead to premature aging. Utilize a sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher every day.

- Invest in a humidifier. Dry, cold temperatures can rob the skin of essential moisture, even indoors. Dermatologists suggest using a humidifier at home to boost the amount of moisture in the air. This can make skin more comfortable and can have other health benefits as well.

- Skip hot showers. It can be tempting to sit under a hot stream of water to warm up. However, hot water dries out the skin by depleting its stores of natural oils, says Glacier Med Spa. Take warm showers instead and don't stay in for longer than 15 minutes.

- Limit exfoliation. While exfoliation can remove dead skin, overdoing it can make already sensitive skin more raw. Increase the time between exfoliation treatments. Consult with a dermatologist for more advice about dealing with flaky skin.

- Don't forget your lips. Using a thicker moisturizer on the body and face can help add and retain moisture. But pay attention to your lips and eyes as well. Something as simple as petroleum jelly on the lips can help prevent chapping. Invest in a quality eye cream to help the delicate skin around the eyes as well.

Modifications must be made to skincare routines in anticipation of seasonal weather changes.

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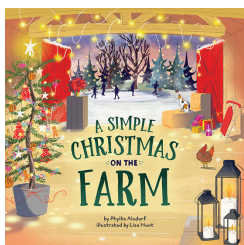
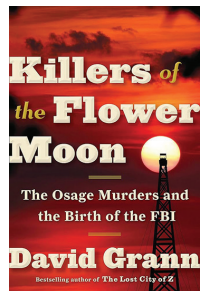
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Christmas Stocking Decorating Tips & Tricks



Hanging Christmas stockings is just one of the many traditions that fill the days leading up to Christmas. One theory regarding the origins of stockings says the tradition began when a poor widower who had three daughters worried over having enough money for their wedding dowries to help secure the daughters' futures. The women, who had hung their stockings by the fireplace to dry, woke up to find solid gold spheres inside. This legend suggests kindly St. Nicholas visited the home in the night and left the presents, helping ensure the daughters could marry well, after all.

Christmas stockings were the first places where gifts were stowed, before under the boughs of Christmas trees became the primary spot for placing gifts. Then stockings were secondary vessels reserved for small trinkets. Today stockings are largely Christmas decorations rather than places to place gifts. Still, they're a key component of holiday magic.

When including stockings in holiday festivities, follow these tips for whimsy and more.

- **Utilize stocking holders.** Stocking holders are either metal or wooden devices that are placed on mantels. Hooks on the holders suspend the stockings. Just be sure the holders are sturdy enough to handle the weight of a stuffed stocking if you plan on filling it with goodies.

- **Determine your style.** There are Christmas stockings that coordinate to just about any interior design style. From farmhouse to modern to traditional, choose one that fits with your aesthetic. That isn't to say you can't mix and match stockings if you prefer a more eclectic, homespun feel.

- **Enhance your stocking look.** If stockings are strictly decorative, enhance their look with a few tricks. First, use tissue paper or balled up shopping bags to stuff the stockings and give them shape. Fill a small baggie with sand or florist glass and place in the heel of the stocking to balance it out and prevent the stocking from blowing around in the breeze.

- **No fireplace; no problem.** Stockings are traditionally hung from the fireplace mantel, but if you don't have a fireplace there is no need to fret. Simply use ribbons to hang them from the bannister of a staircase, or hang stockings right on walls with removable hooks, or from sturdy shelves. You also can think creatively and hang larger stockings on a door like you might a wreath.

Whether they're decorative or functional, stockings can be an integral component of holiday decor in a home.

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Holiday Wreath Dos & Don'ts

No greenery is more recognized during the holiday season than Christmas trees. However, wreaths likely take a close second to towering evergreens when it comes to green holiday decor. It is important to treat wreaths with care in order to maximize their longevity and beauty. The following tips can help ensure wreaths remain fresh and festive throughout the month of December.

- Choose the right design. Select a wreath that is not too busy nor too boring. It is important to strike the right balance. A good wreath has a focal point, which may be a festive bow or another decorative piece. Keep in mind this is a wreath which should have lots of greenery on display, rather than flowers that characterize other seasonal wreaths.
- Weigh your wreath. Take a moment to ask a salesman how heavy the wreath is when you purchase it. Knowing the weight of the wreath will help you identify the proper hanging mechanism, as hooks are generally characterized by the weight they can hold. A less than sturdy hook can increase the chances the wreath falls down and ends up damaged.
- Determine your hanging method. Once you know the weight of the wreath, you can figure out how to secure it to a door or window without having to drill holes into any structures. Removable adhesive strips are one option, provided you attach something like cardboard or another material to the back of the wreath upon which the adhesive strips can be stuck. Otherwise, over-the-door wreath hangers are wise investments that can support large, heavy wreaths.
- Consider the safety of pets. When decorating with plant material, it is important to know what is safe for pets in the household. According to the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine, most holiday plants cause irritation of the mouth. Pine trees produce oils that can cause gastrointestinal issues.
- Exercise caution with storm doors. If you hang a wreath between a glass storm door and your front door, the air around the wreath will heat up and cause the wreath to turn brown.
- Choose a cool spot. In addition to avoiding heat that builds up between doors, you should select a cool spot out of the hot sun. Many pine trees, like balsam fir, react more favorably to cooler temperatures and will keep their vibrant green color and fragrance more readily.
- Go artificial. If you want to hang a wreath indoors, opt for an artificial one. Prolonged warm temperatures inside may prematurely dry out a fresh wreath, ultimately turning it into a fire hazard.



A few pointers can ensure wreaths remain a beautiful component of holiday decor throughout the season. *@metrocreativeconnection*



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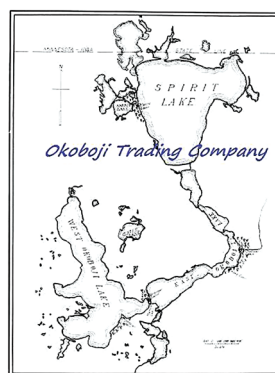
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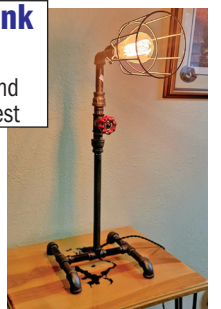
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Fun Ways to Enjoy Winter

Winter begins on December 21, 2023, and ends on March 19, 2024. Many people lament the arrival of winter, perhaps thinking the colder temperatures and shorter hours of sunlight will compromise their chances to have fun. Even though particularly chilly thermostat readings or stormy conditions can hamper some plans, when people dig deeper they may find that even the coldest days present opportunities for enjoyment.

When winter begins, the following activities can make for an entertaining way to celebrate the arrival of the season.

- Build a snow creation. Use the first significant snowfall of the season to organize a snowman, snowwoman, or snow-animal-making event or contest. Waterproof gloves are a necessary piece of equipment, as are buckets for moving snow, shovels, carving and shaping tools (which can be plastic cutlery), and accessories to dress up the final product.
- Go sledding on the best hills. Sledding is a popular wintertime activity that doesn't require too much equipment. Sleds can be purchased at sporting goods stores or toy stores. Sledders of all ages should consider wearing helmets to protect against injury if they will be traversing especially steep hills.
- Host a winter block party. Many cities and towns across North America participate in WinterFest events, which run the gamut from food and craft festivals to sporting events. Individuals can take cues from these type of activities and plan neighborhood festivals



right on their streets. Neighbors can wheel out their fire pits or utilize outdoor propane heaters to keep spots cozy. Hot cocoa and cider stations and warm treats can keep everyone from feeling too cold. Electric slow cookers can keep everything from soups to chilis to stews warm and participants can enjoy a buffet of hearty foods.

- Visit an ice rink. Whether a rink is indoors or outside, ice skating is a quintessential wintertime activity. Skaters of all skill levels can take to the ice and enjoy some exercise and laughs. Check local rink schedules to take advantage of open skate times when hockey games or practices are not dominating the ice.
- Mark the winter

solstice. The winter solstice, also known as the start of astronomical winter, is the shortest day of sunlight on the calendar. It occurs when either of the Earth's poles reaches maximum tilt away from the sun. In the Northern Hemisphere, this occurs on December 21, 2023. Because there will be only roughly seven hours of daylight, take steps to make the fact that the sun will set at its earliest a little easier to swallow. Kids can run around outdoors with glow sticks, while adults can deck their homes in twinkle lights if they are not decorated for Christmas. Lanterns, campfires and candles can be lit, and everyone can gather outdoors to chat and socialize.

Winter begins on December 21, 2023, and there are plenty of ways to celebrate this fun, if sometimes frigid, season.

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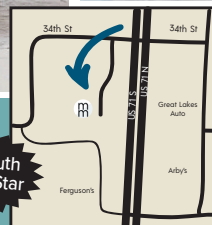


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Tasty Tidbits About Eggnog



Eggnog is a rich and delicious beverage that has become synonymous with the most festive time of year. This milk- and egg-based concoction is tasty on its own, or it can be dressed up with other flavors and spiked with a favorite spirit when celebrating the holiday season with other adult partygoers.

December is National Eggnog Month, and December 24 is National Eggnog Day. There is no more perfect time of year to learn everything you can about eggnog — all the while sipping a cup of this creamy concoction. Indulge in these festive facts about the beverage, courtesy of Mental Floss, The Fact Site and Tastemade.

- Eggnog likely originated in the medieval period and was known as “posset,” a hot, milk-based drink made of spices and wine. Even though posset could be a cocktail, it also was used as a remedy for colds and flu for its soothing properties.
 - Milk, eggs and sherry used in the early recipes were difficult to come by, so when eggnog first appeared it was a drink only the wealthy could enjoy. That changed when eggnog was popularized in the American colonies, where dairy products and liquor were more readily available.
 - Entomologists believe “eggnog” stems from the word “noggin,” which refers to small wooden mugs often used to serve strong ale, known by the slang word “nog.”
 - In the Medieval period, it was risky to drink milk straight because it wasn’t pasteurized. Eggnog contained alcohol so that it would kill off any harmful bacteria in the milk.
 - A typical homemade version of eggnog has roughly one egg per serving. However, commercial eggnog is regulated by the FDA and can only contain 1 percent of the product’s final weight in egg yolk solids. That stems from fear of raw egg and salmonella.
 - President George Washington apparently enjoyed serving eggnog at Christmas, and even had his own special recipe (see below), according to the Old Farmer’s Almanac.
 - There is no right or wrong alcohol to use when preparing eggnog. Distilled spirits like rum, sherry, cognac, and whiskey all have produced suitable egg-nogs.
 - Puerto Rican coquito is a traditional drink that is very similar to eggnog.
 - Individuals concerned about eggs or milk in eggnog can enjoy a vegan recipe made from nut milk instead. Commercially produced vegan eggnog offerings are now more widely available.
 - One of the more notable flavors in eggnog comes from the use of nutmeg. Nutmeg is a fragrant spice made from grinding the seed of the nutmeg tree.
- Now that you’ve learned about eggnog, whip up a batch of George Washington’s original recipe this holiday season.



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Eggnog

(George Washington’s original interpretation)

- 1 quart cream
 - 1 quart milk
 - 1 dozen tablespoons sugar
 - 1 pint brandy
 - 1/2 pint rye whiskey
 - 1/2 pint Jamaican rum
 - 1/4 pint sherry
 - 6 Eggs
- Mix liquor first, then separate yolks and whites of eggs, add sugar to beaten yolks, mix well. Add milk and cream, slowly beating. Beat whites of eggs until stiff and fold slowly into mixture. Let sit in cool place for several days. Taste frequently. Tip: Today’s recipe makers may want to set the eggnog in the refrigerator as the “cool place” of choice. *@metrocreativeconnection*

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Inspiring Ideas for Last-Minute Holiday Shoppers

It's unlikely that anyone aspires to be a last-minute holiday shopper. Putting off holiday shopping until the last minute can make for a stressful home stretch to the season, and there's no guarantee store shelves won't already be picked clean or that gifts purchased online will arrive on time.

Despite how unappealing last-minute shopping can be, it's still a fact of life for millions of holiday shoppers. As the clock winds down this holiday season, shoppers can look to these ideas for inspiration.

• **Gift cards:** Gift cards may never earn a distinction as the most sentimental item to give a loved one during the holiday season, but they are surprisingly sought-after. In fact, a survey from the National Retail Federation found that 54 percent of participants identified gift cards as the most-wanted gift of the 2022 holiday season. Chain retailers, small businesses and restaurants are among the many establish-

ments that sell gift cards, so shoppers are bound to find a card to please anyone on their shopping list.

• **Food/beverage:** The holi-



day season is a popular time to indulge in some great food and wash it down with a favorite wine or another adult beverage. That makes food and beverages a great holiday gift. Shoppers can take a loved one out to a favorite restaurant, prepare a homemade treat or purchase a favorite dish from a local specialty grocery store or eatery. Pair the food with an appropriate beverage and this accessible last-minute gift idea is sure to be a hit.

• **Tickets:** Tickets to a movie, sporting event, live theater performance, or concert are another gift idea that likely won't be gobbled up by early bird shoppers. People of

all ages enjoy experiences, and a 2022 survey from the travel booking platform GetYourGuide found that 50 percent of survey respon-

dents indicated they would enjoy tickets to a concert or show.

• **Books:** Books make an ideal holiday gift for everyone from young kids to grandparents. Traditional print books are small enough that they can likely arrive on time even if they're purchased just a few days before Christmas. E-book sellers enable gift givers to pick the perfect time to notify loved ones they have received an electronic book. Audiobooks, which can be downloaded to a smartphone or given as a CD, make an ideal gift for loved ones who spend a lot of time behind the wheel. Last-minute holiday shopping can be stressful. However, various sought-after items can be secured at the last minute, ensuring gift givers' loved ones have a happy holiday season.

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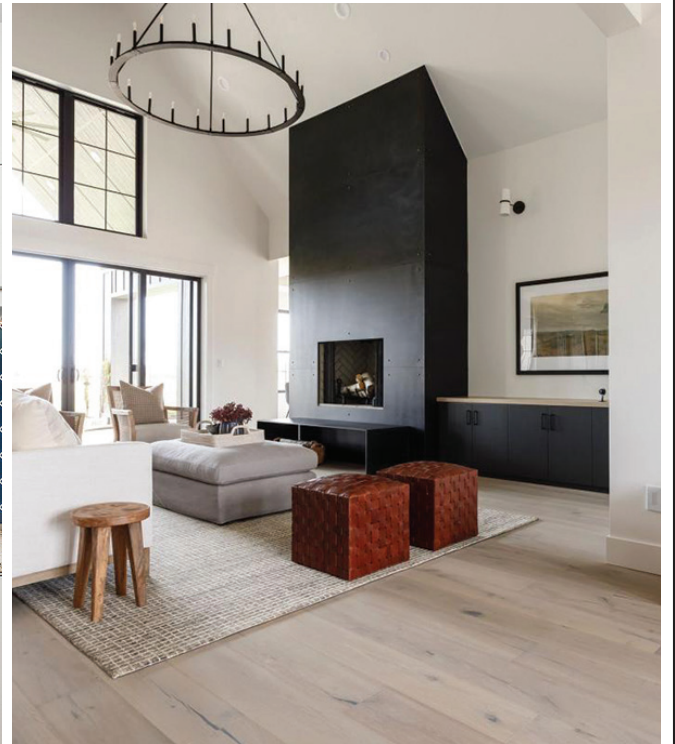
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Pick the Perfect Christmas Tree

Christmas trees are among the most recognizable symbols of the holiday season, and the popularity of trees is undeniable. According to the National Christmas Tree Association, approximately 25 to 30 million real Christmas trees are sold in the United States each year. Christmas trees also are big business in Canada, where Statistics Canada notes cash receipts from Canadian Christmas tree producers totaled nearly \$163.5 million in 2022.

Annual spending on Christmas trees underscores how important they are to holiday decor. Christmas trees serve as the centerpiece in millions of holiday home decor schemes, so it's important to pick a tree that can shine in that role. This holiday season, celebrants can consider these tips as they look for the perfect Christmas tree.

• **Measure the area** where the tree will be placed. A large tree can be awe-inspiring, but also can stick out like a sore thumb if it takes up too much space. There should be enough room around the tree for families and their guests to sit around it. The home interior



experts at Better Homes & Gardens recommend leaving a minimum of six inches between the top of the tree and the ceiling. If a tree topper will be added, make sure the top of the tree is at least 12 inches from the ceiling. Measure the area before leaving to buy a tree so it can fit nicely into the room and the surrounding decor.

• **Try the shake test.** Anyone who has purchased a fresh-cut Christmas tree is undoubtedly familiar with the shake test, which remains an effective way to measure the dryness of the tree. A slight shake will produce some fallen needles. If the needles are brown and few and far between, then the tree likely is not overly dry. However, a lot of falling green needles indicates the tree is already drying out, which means it could shed quite a bit and lose its looks before Christmas Day.

• **Pick a tree with a symmetrical look.** Trees are living things, so it's unlikely that buyers will find a perfectly symmetrical tree. However, a tree that's misshapen or already has some sagging branches won't make for an awe-inspiring addition to a home decor scheme.

• **Find the trunk** (if you can). A trunk that's visible through the branches indicates the tree does not have dense branches, which will be necessary if homeowners want to dress the tree with ornaments. If it's hard to find the trunk because of all the thick branches and green needles, then the tree is likely pretty healthy.

• **Test the needles.** The home improvement experts at Lowes note that needles should be flexible but still snap when bent sharply. Avoid trees with needles that are already losing their color and can easily be pulled off.

A Christmas tree garners a lot of attention come the holiday season, which only underscores the significance of finding a tree worthy of being the centerpiece of holiday decor.

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Bake up a Sweet Holiday Treat

Entertaining is a big part of the holiday season. Calendars are packed this time of year with gatherings with friends, family and professional colleagues.

Bake up a batch, courtesy of "Live Well Bake Cookies" (Rock Point) by Danielle Rye.

Sour Cream Cookies

Makes 22 cookies

1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour, spooned and leveled
1 teaspoon baking powder
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, softened
3/4 cup granulated sugar
1 large egg, at room temperature
1 1/2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
1/2 cup sour cream, at room temperature

Vanilla Buttercream Frosting

1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, softened
1 1/2 cups powdered sugar
1 tablespoon heavy whipping cream or milk
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
Gel food coloring (optional)



To make the cookies: Preheat the oven to 350°F. Line two large baking sheets with parchment paper or silicone baking mats and set aside.

In a large mixing bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder and salt until well combined. Set aside. In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment or in a large mixing bowl using a handheld mixer, beat the butter and granulated sugar together for 1 to 2 minutes, or until well combined.

Mix in the egg and vanilla extract until fully combined, making sure to stop and scrape down the sides of the bowl as needed.

Mix in the dry ingredients in two additions, alternating with the sour cream. Make sure to mix in each addition until just combined, and be careful not to overmix the batter.

Using a 1 1/2-tablespoon cookie scoop, scoop the cookie dough onto the prepared baking sheets, making sure to leave a little room between each one.

Bake for 14 to 16 minutes, or until the tops of the cookies are set and spring back when touched lightly. Remove from the oven, and allow to cool on the baking sheets for 10 minutes, then carefully transfer the cookies to a wire rack to cool completely.

To make the vanilla buttercream frosting: In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment or in a large mixing bowl using a handheld mixer, beat the butter for 1 to 2 minutes, or until smooth. Add the powdered sugar, 1/2 cup at a time, mixing in each addition until well combined. Add the heavy whipping cream, vanilla extract, and gel food coloring (if using), and continue mixing until fully combined.

Once the cookies have cooled completely, spread the frosting on top of the cookies.

Store the cookies in an airtight container at room temperature or in the refrigerator for up to 4 days.

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Day Trips to Entertain Holiday Guests



Travel tends to heat up as the weather begins to chill around the holiday season. With friends and family to see and holiday cheer to spread, it's no wonder why millions of people take to the roads, railways and friendly skies to travel during the holiday season.

It's not uncommon for holiday hosts to open their homes to loved ones for days at a time. Holiday hosts who want to ensure that visitors enjoy their stay can plan certain excursions to make the most of their time together.

- Go see the lights. Holiday lighting displays are popular across the country. Treat guests to a visit to a nearby attraction. That could be an amusement park that drapes

the center of the park in lights, Main Street storefronts and town centers that put on tree lighting ceremonies, urban centers where department stores showcase impressive windows, or other attractions where lights take center stage.

- See a show. From productions of "A Christmas Carol" to other holiday favorites, it's not difficult to find entertainment that showcases some holiday spirit. Dance troupes may be showcasing "The Nutcracker" or a choral ensemble may be putting on a concert of Christmas carols. Enjoy a night or day out at one of these events.

- Visit a cathedral or temple. The holiday season brings many individuals closer to their faiths. Travelers may

want to visit a house of worship during their stay. Many churches are dressed up for Christmas and some may even have live animals in their living nativity scenes.

- Cut down a Christmas tree. Save the tree cutting and trimming for when guests arrive. This way everyone can enjoy a day out at the tree farm as families select the perfect evergreen. Partake in refreshments such as hot chocolate or warm cider, then return home to decorate the tree together. Day trips with overnight guests staying for the holidays can make for an entertaining way to get out of the house and enjoy time together.

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