

OUR EXPERT'S TREE-DRESSING TIPS

1 Themes really liven up your Christmas decorations. Keep it simple with a colour – silver's great – or pick a more unusual theme. Once we had an Arctic theme and used 1ft-high paper-mâché penguins as decorations, with a King Penguin at the top. This year I'm jazzing up a Kirkcaldie & Stains orange/copper tree – a new spin on gold – with copper antiques. Something else I'd like to try is a 1920s masquerade theme with jewels, feather fronds, and feather boas instead of tinsel!

2 Beach themes are great fun and very summery. Drill small holes in some shells and attach thread to hang on your tree, or buy inexpensive silver Christmas balls and glue shells onto them. Dry kelp or seaweed in the sun, spray it silver, and spiral it up your tree like tinsel. Surround your tree's base with driftwood, or create miniature glass buoys by plaiting natural string and tying around glass balls.

3 Fake trees are great because they're a one-off expense. The wire branches are easily manipulated so tricky decorations don't fall off. A fake's your best bet for a professional, symmetrical look; real trees can be sparse or irregular in shape. But for some, the smell of a real pine tree is the essence of Christmas.

4 You don't need a big tree to make an impact. Just a well-decorated one. If you're on a budget, a small, 4-5ft tree won't need as many decorations. To make decorations go further (and save lounge space), push the tree against a wall and decorate only what's visible. If you've got a fake tree, bend the up-



THE EXPERT It was during her five years as a window dresser at upmarket Wellington department store Kirkcaldie & Stains that 31-year-old Frances Richardson became enraptured by Christmas decorating, helping put together their famous Christmas windows. But now she saves her tinsel tendencies for home, and works to create special (but not always seasonal) effects for world-leading film-effects company Weta Workshop.



against-the-wall branches towards the front to add volume.

5 Christmas lights should be the first thing to grace your tree. Keep them on when you're placing them, then turn off the house lights, step back and squint to check the spacing. While a 6ft tree usually needs 250-plus lights, I reckon you can never have enough.

6 Go for a classic look that doesn't distract the eye. Use only five or six different types of decorations (such as poinsettias, pine cones, balls or bows) but use at least 20 of each. To ensure there are no sparse bits, place plenty of decorations close to the trunk. Spiral longer decorations (such as tinsel, ribbon and beads) to give your tree that age-old festive look. And when you think the tree's full enough, keep adding.

7 If you're budget-conscious, use Christmas balls and poinsettias to bulk out the tree. Pine cones are another inexpensive but standout decoration. Paint the tips white and sprinkle glitter on the paint. Or spray the cones one colour, paint the tips with glue and sprinkle with a similarly coloured glitter.

8 Christmas stockings aren't just for kids! Try incorporating your theme into your stockings by gluing/sewing on items like shells.

9 A welcoming wreath on your front door always adds a festive feel. To make your own, see our step-by-step guide on page 130.

10 Decorate your dining table with a Christmassy runner. Or create a centrepiece with candles and an arrangement of your themed decorations.



HAVE YOURSELF A CAREFREE LITTLE XMAS

Think laterally this Christmas! Avoid festive meltdown with tips and tricks from our experts to make this season special, not stressful

WORDS SARAH LANG

OUR EXPERT'S GIFT-WRAPPING TIPS

1 Your main wrap doesn't have to be expensive. In fact plain brown, white or black paper can look a whole lot cooler. And yes, pink and red can and do go together. Be brave with your wrapping colour combinations by using what's on hand – it'll save money while creating a truly stand-out gift. Colour combos I like are lilac with chocolate brown and bright red stripes with deep purple...

2 Paper isn't the only thing you can wrap gifts with. Use fabric, or even combine the two. The best place to find cheap, oh-so-versatile fabric scraps is in op shops and vintage stores. As sticky tape won't hold and will look messy, tie the fabric with something like lightweight Trade Aid organic hemp. Don't stress if the folds don't sit perfectly; dot on a little Kraft glue to hold the edges together.

3 Use giftwrap to express the quirky, idiosyncratic things you love about the recipient. There are no rules! Use collage, découpage (gluing coloured paper cut-outs onto an object), illustration or handwriting to acknowledge the person's favourite things and interests – think colours, sports, movies, books... Try sticking cut-outs from newspapers, magazines, and old retro wallpaper onto the parcel. If they're a crossword fan, cut out and paste on a crossword and the clues... and post the answers later!

4 Make use of Google and Wikipedia. There are all sorts of funky images and prose you can download and print out. For instance, cut out an image of your recipient's favourite musician or artist and découpage it over cheap brown paper.



5 Cut and paste your artwork onto plain wrapping paper. Or just draw it on freehand. Don't forget that children's artwork can easily be cut and pasted (scan it if you want to keep the original) to make a meaningful parcel. Another way to add personality to your parcel is to embellish it with knick-knacks, keepsakes, and even little notes explaining why these items remind you of the recipient. For instance, you could include something like an old button with a note reading, 'this button reminds me of those smock dresses Mum made us when we were little!'

6 Draw attention away from any awkwardly shaped gifts. Attaching a hand-made gift tag on which you could sew old buttons, fabric scraps, or even glue flowers will draw attention away from an imperfectly wrapped gift. Give raffia, cellophane and tight curling ribbons a miss: They're expensive and overdone. Chances are you have bits-and-pieces you could use at home: Why not try leftover knitting wool to attach a tag?

7 Utilise the art of letter writing and appreciation of fine stationery. Both are back in vogue for a very good reason. Your handwriting might look like scrawl to you, but to others it's a meaningful expression of who you are. Writing a quote or slogan across light-coloured paper can produce stunning effects.

8 Gift-wrapping doesn't have to be a chore. In fact, it can be a great reason for a get-together! Invite some friends over for an evening of creative wrapping. You'll be able to share enthusiasm, paper, fabric, and other off-cuts.

THE EXPERT After a decade in sales and marketing, Cathie Davis decided to inject a bit of creativity into her life with an art and design diploma. During the course the 47-year-old developed the idea for an online gift store that would create unique, personalised gifts, and specialise in vintage parcels and gift-wrapping. That evolved into the now two-year-old business Jumping Tangents, which she runs from her Wanaka home with the help of husband Tim and daughters Kimberley, 22, and Claire, 18.





OUR EXPERT'S CATERING TIPS

- 1 Make lists.** People sometimes feel nerdy about making lists. You can either stow away the list where no-one will see it, or take the opposite approach and write it up on a whiteboard! Sure, everyone will joke about it, but because it's staring them in the face they're likely to say "I can help with that".
- 2 Delegate.** Forget the "they-won't-do-it-right" mindset and delegate. If you're hosting a bring-a-plate meal, ask each person to bring a particular food or course.
- 3 Have a time-plan.** Choreographing your Christmas dinner so all the food's ready at the same time can be daunting. On the day, a time-plan (such as '11.30am baste turkey') stops you stressing about what you need to do when. Without one it's easy to forget things, especially after a few drinks!
- 4 Prepare your plates.** No room in the oven to warm all the plates? Don't skip this step, especially if you're serving up traditional roast, gravy and veges – just get it out of the way early. Heat stacks of three to four plates (durable china!) in the oven at 120-130°C. Transfer the plates to a teatowel-lined chilly bin and replace lid. They'll stay hot for 2-3 hours.
- 5 Deal with the veges.** Something else you can get out of the way early is potatoes and green veg. Boil the potatoes, drain the water, return to the element for 30 seconds so the remaining water evaporates. Season, cover with tinfoil, lay tea towels on top, then replace the lid – they'll stay hot for an hour. Place green veges in a blanching basket, then place the basket in a very large pot of boiling



water. Once they're cooked, put the veges in a large container lined with cold-water-wrung tea towels, and cover with more damp tea towels. This way they'll stay hot for 30 minutes, without overcooking.

6 Trim your costs. A roast leg of pork, or glazed belly pork, is an economical main that's delicious served with roast kumara. For an outdoorsy meal, green-shell mussels are surprisingly economical. Cook the mussels in big pots on the barbecue and flavour either with herbs and butter or Asian-style with coconut milk – lovely with new potatoes. Or go for spicy sausages with a green salad.

7 Pre-prepare your salad. For a ready-to-go salad, put dressing then serving spoons in an empty salad bowl, place prepared greens on top, cover with tea towels and put in the fridge. Come dinner, simply toss it at the table.

8 Keep young children happy with goodie bags. Fill them with little packs of strawberries, mandarins, grapes, carrot sticks, plain sandwiches and juices. It'll keep them entertained, and because they feel ownership of their bags they're more likely to eat healthy food, and less likely to overdose on rich food and get grumpy.

9 Buy an extra fridge. A cheap second fridge is super-handy during the year, for drinks and large cases of fruit, and invaluable at Christmas time – particularly after Christmas dinner when you've got all those leftovers.

10 Don't over-complicate catering. As a rule-of-thumb for a Christmas nibbles-and-drinks party, allow nine to 10 pieces of food per person and serve six to seven different things.



THE EXPERT For the past 20 years, leading chef, caterer, teacher and food writer Ruth Pretty and husband Paul have run one of New Zealand's largest catering companies, Ruth Pretty Catering, from their 27-acre property in Te Horo on the Kaiti Coast. Also onsite is a kitchen shop and a cooking school where this year Ruth will run 15 Christmas cooking classes. Known for fresh, imaginative Kiwi cuisine, last month the 55-year-old released her fifth cookbook, *Ruth Pretty Entertains*.



Christmas to do list

- ✓ *Mid-November: Start a computer file with card/gift ideas*
- ✓ *Mid-November: make lists (events, tasks, gifts, food, cards, budget)*
- ✓ *Set spending limit*
- ✓ *Write newsletter*
- ✓ *Mid-November: send parcels overseas*
- ✓ *End November: send cards & newsletter*
- ✓ *Early December: Pencil in Xmas shopping day*
- ✓ *Ask family about Xmas gift donation*
- ✓ *Early December: Have a clear-out!*
- ✓ *Draw up Xmas Day schedule: Delegate tasks*
- ✓ *Pencil in day for gift/goodie making session*





TIME MANAGEMENT TIPS

- 1 Keep control of the budget.** Set up a gift-spending limit or Secret Santa, where each person buys a gift for just one other. For a Secret Santa twist, add a challenge: Who can find the funniest, most practical or original gift?
- 2 Schedule a Christmas shopping day.** Pencil in a dedicated gift shopping day in early December and take your lists of gift ideas with you. Keep your recipients and your budget in mind. By shopping early with a pre-planned list you'll avoid impulsive, expensive gift mistakes. Buy some inexpensive general gifts to pop under the tree for unexpected guests.
- 3 Join in the season of giving.** Make a charity donation, buying charity Christmas cards or giving a gift that benefits someone less well off, be they a neighbour or those in the Third World. Involve the family in deciding how to do this.
- 4 Send overseas gifts and cards in time.** Aim to send parcels by mid-November and have

Christmas cards written and sent by the start of December. A quick and fun way to keep everyone up-to-date is a family newsletter.

5 De-clutter for Christmas. Spend some time in early December tidying your home so it's clean and clear for the celebrations.

6 Draw up a schedule for the big day. To make Christmas Day easier, draw up a plan and delegate tasks to family members. Even if you're playing host, ask guests to get involved: Many people like to cook certain dishes or organise other traditions.

7 Cook up some gifts. It's economical and fun to give home-cooked gifts. Have a session in December, freeze the baking and stow away the rest until present-wrapping time. For great food gift ideas, see page 156.

8 Get everything done before the 24th. Aim to spend Christmas Eve relaxing. If you need to make one last trip to the supermarket, do it early to beat the festive stress crowds!



THE EXPERT Wendy

Davie was once a time-poor mother-of-three. Now she runs Totally Organised, an award-winning organisation and time-management company. Drawing together

her skills as a speaker, photographer, writer, and emergency-room nurse, she has spent the past four years building up the Christchurch business. Via seminars, workshops and one-on-one sessions, Wendy and consultants in Auckland and Christchurch (she's adding staff around the country) advise individuals, organisations and families on how to get organised. The 42-year-old's first book *The Accidental Organiser* (\$24.99, Longacre Press) was published in September. Not only is Wendy on top of this Christmas, she's got advice for getting next-year sorted too: "Get a head start on next year by keeping all your lists from this year and adding to them as you think of things."