

## How to have a harmonious holiday

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COURTESY JAMES WU-CHIK

(CNN) -- Here's a partridge-in-a-pe: approach to dealing with anything (and anyone) that the season throws your way.

12 outdoor touches 'Tis the season to festoon your front door. If you're not a natural when it comes to outdoor decor,

here's an easy recipe that will delight neighbors, friends, and you.

1 wreath, fresh or dried: Find magnificent options at [shopterrain.com](http://shopterrain.com), or use florist wire to embellish a basic wreath with limes, berries, and feathery stems.

2 urns flanking the door: The right lightweight fiberglass picks will look weighty and majestic. Try [ballarddesigns.com](http://ballarddesigns.com), [homedepot.com](http://homedepot.com), and [jamaligarden.com](http://jamaligarden.com).



*Your last-minute holiday 'techie' gifts*



*Distraction: Santa drives a brown truck*

2 faux boxwoods for filling the urns: Tall cone-shaped topiaries are classic and blend well with any style of architecture. One that's about four feet fits a 20-inch-high urn well; consider

the Boxwood Cone topiary (\$185, [cfdnewyork.com](http://cfdnewyork.com) for stores). Cover "dirt" with a layer of pinecones if you want to add a natural element.

6 battery-operated outdoor pillar candles: Various heights for lining steps asymmetrically.

1 box of glass orbs: In a single color for turning a small, sculptural bare tree or shrub into something magical. Best to choose a tree away from strong wind gusts and kid activity. Check out

inexpensive shatterproof ornaments from such sources as [christmascentral.com](http://christmascentral.com), [bronnens.com](http://bronnens.com), and [Int.com](http://Int.com).

## Real Simple: [Holiday celebrations around the world](#)

### 11 gifts for giving

Create an emergency-present bin and you won't have to run to the store every time you need a hostess gift or be caught empty-handed when a friend shows up with chocolate truffles. Don't overthink this—just stash items in your own price range that have the potential to please a number of recipients.

#### Some ideas:

Modern objects for the mantel or a bookcase

Tech toys, like a portable speaker or a mini camera

Candles and soap in ready-to-give wrapping and clean, earthy, gender-crossing fragrances

Lush journals that you can personalize ("Here's a trip diary for your upcoming vacation!")

iTunes gift cards (a year-round blessing) for tough demographics, like teens

A humor book whose cover alone makes you laugh out loud (think Sedaris, Stewart, Fey)

Containers to hold treats (a beautiful bottle or an artful plate that you can fill with holiday goodies).

Keep your emergency-gift stash on a high shelf in the linen closet or in a rolling under-bed box—and toss in lovely presents you receive that are not right for you but appropriate for regifting.

## Real Simple: [The best and worst appetizer choices](#)

### 10 household fixes

These are quick, clever strategies for tackling those pesky problems that have been irking you all year long (before your mother zeroes in on them).

**Furniture scratches:** Open a fresh walnut and rub the meat directly onto the spot; the oil masks marks on various types of wood.

**Smudges on painted walls:** Add a splash of white vinegar to warm water, then rub out marks with a soft cloth.

**Slow-moving drains and garbage disposals:** Pour in ½ cup baking soda, followed by ½ cup vinegar; let sit for 2 hours. Run warm water, or turn on the disposal for a few seconds.

**Peeling wallpaper:** Use an angled artist's paintbrush to apply wallpaper-seam adhesive (sold at hardware stores) to the underside of the paper, then press flat with a paint roller.

**Less-than-fresh fridge:** Add a few drops of vanilla extract to a wet cloth, then wipe down drawers and shelves. For dried-on spills, mix equal parts vinegar and dish soap in a spray bottle, spritz, let sit for 10 minutes, then wipe.

**Scuff marks on dishes:** Mix cream of tartar and water to buff out marks. For tea and coffee stains on mugs, rub with a 50-50 combination of salt and lemon juice.

**Dusty leaves:** Use a clean, wide soft-bristle paintbrush to sweep dust from large-leafed plants. For smaller plants, use a blush brush.

**Bottom gunk in narrow vases:** Fill with warm water and drop in 2 denture tablets (you can break them first). Swish the solution around, let sit for 1 hour, and rinse.

**Dirty tops of pillar candles:** Wipe with a cotton ball dipped in rubbing alcohol.

**Grease marks between double-glass oven doors:** Use a rubber band to secure a damp cotton cloth around a metal spatula; slip it through the bottom vent of the door. After a few passes, swap the damp cloth for a dry one.

## Real Simple: [50 best holiday cookie recipes](#)

### 9 minute cleanup

Your rapid-fire plan for shining up critical (a.k.a. guest-visible) zones when you're down to the wire.

Supplies needed: Broom, microfiber cloths, glass cleaner, disinfecting wipes, 2 laundry baskets, and 2 clean tube socks.

Minute 1: Step outside and use the broom to dust cobwebs and debris from the door, the door frame, and the front windows. Sweep the stoop.

Minute 2: In the entryway, use a damp microfiber cloth to dust the console, lamps, and any other furnishings. Toss backpacks and shoes in a laundry basket and stash in a bedroom closet.

Minutes 3 to 5: In the powder room, spray mirrors with glass cleaner and rub in circles with a clean micro fiber cloth. With the disinfecting wipes, clean the vanity, the faucet, and the soap dish. With new wipes, swipe the toilet handle, the top of the tank, the lid, and the seat. Wielding wipes in both hands, clean the edges of the floor. Set out fresh hand towels and empty the trash.

Minutes 6 to 7: In the kitchen, use the disinfecting wipes to clean the counter-tops. (There's no time to move small appliances; hit only exposed surfaces.) Put dirty dishes in the dishwasher and empty the trash.

Minute 8: For the living room, grab a basket and toss in any clutter (school-books, dog toys, remotes). With a damp cloth, dust exposed furniture tops.

Minute 9: Run upstairs and shut all the bedroom doors. Put tube socks on your hands inside out and, backing down the stairs, swipe the staircase of dust. Done! (Don't forget to remove your dirty sock-gloves before greeting guests.)

Real Simple: [Easy ways to reduce holiday stress](#)

8 hosting staples

Shorten your shopping list by keeping these long-lasting treats (shown opposite) on hand. Make these goodies your go-tos and you'll never have to think about appetizers again.

Wasabi peas inspire serious sipping. (They're hot, hot, hot!) Good for getting the party started.

Green olives are a classic and just right if you're putting out only one thing.

Artichoke pesto, an upscale alternative to onion dip.

Salted nuts—mix store-bought almonds and pistachios.

Cornichons are perfect with spicy cured meats and hard cheeses.

Herb-infused vodka will please those in the know.

Caramel popcorn works with either drinks or coffee.

Pepper relish gives goat cheese a kick. Or include it on a crowd-pleasing ham platter (see page 192 for details).

Real Simple: [6 ways to have healthy holidays](#)

7 planning pointers

Add these to-dos to your date book and subtract some stress.

By November 30: Order cards online. Minted.com offers heavy-stock options with crisp graphics. And Pinholepress.com features modern eight-photo accordion cards—like a slide show in an envelope.

By December 2: Do an inventory of holiday necessities: extra chairs, linens, dishes, flatware, glasses, servers.

Tuesday, December 4, or Wednesday, December 5: Take a couple of hours to tackle in-store shopping for any of the above and for presents that you'll need to mail. Stores are least crowded on Tuesday and Wednesday mornings.

By December 5: Pick out or shop for holiday party outfits for you and the family. Tip: For dress-up--averse sons, think corduroys, desert boots, and a no-iron shirt that looks good untucked, because it will end up that way anyway.

Friday, December 7: Finish your Hanukkah shopping (the first night is December 8), and jot down which gifts to give which nights so you can relax and enjoy the week.

By December 12: Mail Christmas gifts to ensure that they'll arrive on time.

By December 20: Hand out tips.

Teachers: A gift card to a favorite store or coffee shop, along with a heartfelt note from your child.

Trash collectors: \$10 to \$15 each.

Letter carrier: Government regulations do not allow U.S. Postal Service employees to accept cash gifts, only nonmonetary gifts worth less than \$20. Go for a \$15 gift card.

Newspaper delivery person: Tip 10 percent of what you pay annually for a subscription.

Housekeeper: One day's pay.

Hairstylist or manicurist: The cost of one service.

Real Simple: [6 ways to have healthy holidays](#)

### 6 tree tips

Picking the one: Your local lots may sell only a couple of varieties, but if you have a broad choice, "true firs" (noble, Fraser, Nordmann, and Turkish) last longest: four to six weeks. Second best for life span: Douglas fir, Scotch pine, balsam, and grand fir. Spruce trees last only two or three weeks. Shop where cut trees are kept under shady tents or wrapped in burlap—not open to full sun, where they can dry out. If you prefer an artificial tree but crave the olfactory delight of a fresh one, try ScentSicles (\$8 for six, [scentsicles.com](http://scentsicles.com)), which are small, realistically fragranced sticks in fir, pine, or spruce to camouflage deep in the branches.

Hauling it home: After the seller cuts the trunk for you, place the tree on the car roof with the bottom facing forward to minimize needle loss. Get it in water within four to six hours of a fresh cut. If you're not putting it up right away, set it in a bucket of water in a cool, dark place, like the garage.

Stress-free setup: Before you bring the tree inside but while the netting is still on, place it in its stand to minimize the mess in your living room. (Use a metal stand; plastic will break over time.) Tighten the bolts about 75 percent, haul the tree in, set it in place, and finish securing. Then fill with water (see below).

Light it right: For the easiest way to put on and remove lights, go vertical. Start at the bottom, continuously weaving lights up toward the top of the tree and back down to the base. LEDs use at least 75 percent less energy than traditional lights and last a whopping 25 times longer. Some people still prefer the glow of old-school varieties, but if you're ready to make the money-saving change, try Invisilites (like the Warm White 96 LED Invisilite; \$37 [bronnens.com](http://bronnens.com)), tiny bulbs on a wire so thin, it disappears into the tree.

Health and welfare: You already know that you should keep a tree away from heat sources (vents, fireplaces, woodstoves), both for fire safety and staying power, but you may not know that a tree needs to "drink" about a gallon of water every day. Check the water level daily; the trunk's cut surface should never be exposed to air. Plain tap water is best. (Skip the chemicals and the homespun add-ins.)

The takedown: Find out if your area offers curbside tree recycling and time the (dreaded) task of removal accordingly. When the day comes, ladle water out of the stand, using a turkey baster for the last licks. Nothing beats the plastic-tree-bag-under-the-tree-skirt for an exit strategy. (Try the Christmas-tree removal bag; \$2, [mitrees.com](http://mitrees.com).) Sweep up needles rather than vacuuming; they can clog the machine.

Yes, you can buy a real tree and still be environmentally responsible. In the United States, Christmas trees are grown for harvesting, just like any other crop. Each year, more trees are planted than are cut. And of the 33 million trees sold, more than 30 million are recycled—or, as they say in the trade, "tree-cycled."

Real Simple: [9 holiday pet hazards](#)

### 5 cozy comforts

If you're carving out space for overnight guests in your home office (or right smack in the middle of the living room), a little extra effort can make them feel truly welcome. Kick up your hospitality a notch with:

**A real bed:** An air mattress doesn't scream, "Stay a while!" Consider the Castro Convertibles 39-inch slipcovered ottoman (\$799, [castroconvertibles.com](http://castroconvertibles.com)), which pulls out into a twin-size bed. It has a thick, comfy five-inch mattress and even a headboard. Plus, it's a breeze to set up.

**A nightcap:** As a good-night treat, pour some Port into a decanter and set it in a corner with a cordial glass. You'll find pretty pieces at [crateandbarrel.com](http://crateandbarrel.com).

**A dreamy pillow:** Memory-foam pillows conform to everyone's head, so they please back, side, and stomach sleepers. Try [tempurpedic.com](http://tempurpedic.com).

**A sound machine:** It helps create a sense of privacy by masking household noises and chatter. Check out the options at [brookstone.com](http://brookstone.com), [sharperimage.com](http://sharperimage.com), and [target.com](http://target.com).

**A kit to cover the bases:** Leave out a just-in-case box so guests won't have to bother you with every little request. The Minimergency Kit for Her (\$13, [pinchprovisions.com](http://pinchprovisions.com)) is a cute metallic case with 17 items, like earring backs, hair elastics, and double-sided tape. The guy version includes extra buttons and a shoe-shine towelette.

#### 4 storage solutions

**For ornaments:** The Ornament Storage Chest (\$33, [organizeit.com](http://organizeit.com)) has three divided drawers to nestle a total of 54 four-inch-diameter baubles.

**For lights:** A light reel anchors the plug, allowing you to wind and unwind lights speedily with nary a tangle. (Try Trademark Tools Christmas Light Reels; \$18 for four, [hayneedle.com](http://hayneedle.com).)

**For a dried wreath:** A zippered pouch that hangs on a nail in the attic protects the shape. If we do say so ourselves, the Real Simple wreath-storage bag (\$13, [bedbathandbeyond.com](http://bedbathandbeyond.com)) has it covered.

**For garlands or yard decor:** Long, low, and made of heavy nylon (like a narrow duffel), the St. Nick's Choice four-foot Christmas-tree storage bag (\$10, [lowes.com](http://lowes.com)) houses multiple strands of garland, that wicker angel, or a small artificial tree.

#### 3 potluck dishes

If you're asked to bring a side dish, make: Roasted Butternut Squash with Mustard Vinaigrette. Great warmed up or served at room temperature. (Hands-on time: 20 minutes; total time: 1½ hours.)

If you're asked to bring greens, whip up: Escarole Salad with Walnuts and Parmesan. A light, refreshing break from all that rich holiday food. Toss with dressing just before serving. (Ready in 15 minutes.)

If you're asked to bring a main course, surprise them with: Sausage, Cauliflower, and Kale Potpie. Comforting and rustic, and you can make it a day in advance. (Hands-on time: 25 minutes; total time: 1 hour.)

#### 2 gift-wrap strategies

**Do as the pros do:** A tape dispenser that straps to your hand delivers precut pieces and offers speed and precision. (Try Scotch Pop-Up Handband; \$3, [staples.com](http://staples.com).) Glue Dots work on thick papers and those with metallic finishes that resist tape. (Consider Adhesive Glue Dots; \$4 for 200, [dickblick.com](http://dickblick.com).) Assorted wrapping paper in a single color palette (see the glory of green, above) will make your packages look as good together as they do on their own.

**Make a wrapping station:** Use a pretty umbrella stand or a cylindrical hamper to hold long rolls, with S-hooks on the lip for ribbons and scissors. Or go with a genius store-bought option, like the Gift Wrap Work Station (\$49, [containerstore.com](http://containerstore.com)), which hangs nearly flat in a closet, then stands upright when on duty.

#### 1 brief but brilliant list to take you into the New Year

From the now gone but never forgotten Nora Ephron (1941--2012), What I Wish I'd Known:

You can't be friends with people who call after 11 P.M.

The last four years of psychoanalysis are a waste of money.

The plane is not going to crash.

Anything you think is wrong with your body at the age of thirty-five you will be nostalgic for at the age of forty-five.

Write everything down.

Take more pictures.

You can't own too many black turtleneck sweaters.

The reason you're waking up in the middle of the night is the second glass of wine.

If the shoe doesn't fit in the shoe store, it's never going to fit.

There are no secrets.

Back up your files.

Overtip.

Never let them know.

If only one third of your clothes are mistakes, you're ahead of the game.

You can order more than one dessert.

Excerpted and abridged from *I Feel Bad About My Neck*, by Nora Ephron, published by Vintage.

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