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Rules for Tasteful Holiday Décor

Sellers don't have to forgo all holiday trimmings just because their home is on the market. But they should decorate in a way that won't turn off buyers.

By [Barbara Ballinger](#) | December 2008

There's no doubt the holidays are near: Malls filled with poinsettias, festive music filling elevators, catalogs flooding mailboxes, and home design magazines packed with ways to make the season bright.

Many sellers want to pull out the stops and decorate according to family traditions, but houses that are on the market shouldn't be overly personalized or cluttered at any time. Your job as a real-estate practitioner is to help sellers strike a balance between enjoying their traditions yet showing restraint. Explain that too much “stuff” camouflages what's most important when decorations come down: a home's architectural details, its condition, location, and price.

“Your goal is to help sellers show off their houses, but not their holiday decorations,” says Julie Dana, a home staging professional and co-author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Staging Your Home to Sell* (Alpha, 2007). If you succeed, you'll get them to convince buyers, “I wish this were my home for the holidays,” says Bruce Johnson, president of Lee Kimball, a design/build firm in Winchester, Mass.

Amid all of the challenges of listing a home during the holidays, there is one big plus: Most buyers who are actively looking at this time of year are serious. The following tips will help sellers achieve the right decorating balance:

Add tasteful, generic decorations. “Tasteful decorations can be an asset to a sale,” says David Iannuccilli, CRS, GRI, and co-broker/owner of RE/MAX Professionals in East Greenwich, R.I. But since taste is subjective, we asked Iannuccilli and other pros to define what good holiday taste looks like—and doesn't. Most define it as “elegant,” “simple,” and “quiet.” Iannuccilli specifies a

minimalist approach--one wreath, one tree, one dining table centerpiece. Dana recommends a tall narrow tree to emphasize a room's height and conserve floor space. In the don't-do list, Dana cites no "cute" wreaths with gingerbread men or oversized inflatable snowmen on front yards. She also suggests steering clear of personalized objects such as monogrammed stockings. "When decorations get too personal, people have a hard time picturing themselves in the home," she says. Pat Heydlauff, a feng shui expert in Palm Beach County, Fla., recommends no or few religious symbols, whether crèches or menorahs.

Trade nonseasonal for seasonal decorations. To avoid clutter, remove a nonholiday accessory for each seasonal accessory added, says Dana.

Don't imitate Scrooge. Even if decorating seems a Herculean task, tell sellers not to avoid all decorations. "People expect some, and they add warmth," says Dana.

Think green...and metallic, and white. Too much red and green can backfire. Practitioners suggest a neutral palette of fresh greens, elegant silvers and golds, and classic whites. Karen Fornash, a real estate guru in New York, favors vases of white roses, lilies, and freesia, complemented by evergreens. Christi Page, owner of Top Drawer Hardware in Santa Monica, Ca., suggests replacing a few knobs in a bathroom or kitchen with ones that add a touch of seasonal color.

Remember the joy of entertaining. Because home entertaining connotes happy homeownership, builder David Cohen of Hampden Design & Construction in Newton, Mass., suggests staging a kitchen as if the owners were going to throw a cozy holiday party. "People don't want things to look stark at the holidays," he says.

Be mindful of valuable gifts. Keep most holiday presents and family heirlooms out of sight to avoid distracting buyers, says Gregg Goldsholl, a practitioner with Weichert Realtors in Larchmont, N.Y. Doing so also is a smart precaution for open houses. "Not all people who tour a home are trustworthy," Dana says.

Keep up decorations for a limited time. While most homeowners love prolonging the holiday spirit, experts suggest curtailing it when the house is on the market. Dave Sears, co-founder of OptHome, a homeownership resource Web site in Winchester, Mass., advises a maximum of two weeks before and two after Christmas.

Add warmth and energy. Nothing says holidays more than twinkling lights and crackling fires, but make smart choices. Lights, which also help illuminate a home's exterior in the dark—particularly important in winter when many showings take place—shouldn't be left on all the time. Advise sellers to select efficient LED bulbs and use them with motion detectors or timers, says Rozanne Weissman, senior director of consumer campaigns with the nonprofit Alliance to Save Energy in Washington, D.C. To get a fire going quickly and make clean-up easier, consider manufactured logs, says Mendy Aul, with Pine Mountain in Daleville, Ind.

Minimize smells. Holiday aromas—baked goods and live greens—enhance seasonal decor, but overly strong odors from air fresheners and candles may send buyers running, says Deanne Kory,

senior vice president with The Corcoran Group in New York. Heydlauff tells sellers to leave out a plate of cookies, which buyers will associate with the spirit of giving.

Play soothing music. Most people get their fill of jingles and carols, so suggest nonseasonal favorites that appeal year-round, says Sears.

Use timely marketing materials. Everyone wants to lower expenses, but it's critical not to cut corners when you're taking photos for listing materials. The wrong images—a living room with a tree in summer—signal that a house has been on the market too long, says Dana.

Remember winter's threat. If sellers live in a cold climate, remind them to shovel walks rather than have snow and ice become part of the décor.

And when sellers seem in doubt, remind them that less is always best. Happy Holidays!