

‘Home’ for the holidays



Heather Douglas Photography for Hilltop Interiors

Decking out the cottage makes for a memorable Christmas in Muskoka

Lena Patten loves winter and she especially loves Christmas. The celebrated interior designer and owner of Rosseau's Hilltop Interiors readily admits to going all-out when it comes to decorating her home for the holidays, even adding decorated trees to the guest rooms for when relatives come up. In her opinion, if there's one time to over-decorate, it's Christmas. She channels her inner-elf to fill the home with festive flourishes, and encourages everyone to do the same.

But before you go crazy adding yuletide embellishments everywhere, take a few

moments to consider professional advice. There's a fine line between tasteful and overboard.

"I'm very rustic traditional in my style. That means lots of spruce and pine boughs (real and artificial, depending on where I use them), lots of berries, pinecones, realistic pine boughs on the bannister, nuts, and country-themed décor," explains Patten, who begins decorating in early December. "But that's just my style and it isn't for everyone. I decorate four or five cottages for clients every Christmas and they all have different tastes – vintage, traditional, maybe focused on children. I recommend

STORY BY ANDREW HIND



Heather Douglas Photography for Hilltop Interiors

people find a style that they like and try to maintain it throughout the house so there is a coherency with the décor."

As Patten points out, Christmas doesn't have to be all about the glitz and glamour. You can create beautiful Christmas décor with natural materials. Fresh greens add subtle holiday cheer to your home, permeating a space with natural scent and bringing an element of the outdoors inside.

"I love bringing the outdoors inside," enthuses Patten. "You don't often see the relationship between the holiday season and the outdoors explored in magazines devoted to Christmas decorating, but I



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"We live in Muskoka and winter is such a magical time of year up here – I try to bring some of that unique character to my decorating."

– Lena Patten, Hilltop Interiors

love that. We live in Muskoka and winter is such a magical time of year up here – I try to bring some of that unique character to my decorating. I want to create not only harmony inside but harmony with nature so you feel like you're at the cottage."

Muskoka informs many of Patten's décor decisions. She loves, for example, creating scenes that invoke – through content or style – the north. You might find a table adorned with a Santa dressed in plaid or festive moose made of birch bark nestled amongst pine boughs atop a shelf. It's all about invoking that cottage-country feel.

While Patten admits to going all-out when decorating her home, she does so strategically rather than haphazardly. There's a method to her self-admitted merry madness. "I like to create little scenes throughout the house so it's not random, with decorations just placed wherever," she explains. Keeping like-minded items together makes items appear organized instead of cluttered, giving a cohesive look (grouping items by colour does the same thing and gives your eye a place to rest while taking in all the festive flourishes). "The TV cabinet is one of my favourite spots to decorate. I create a scene with Santa in a birch bark canoe, with traditional-looking ceramic deer off to the side. My brother-in-law hand carves

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a new Santa for us every year and I always put them together in a scene on the piano in a forest of pine boughs..”

In the flurry to give every room in the home a holiday makeover, the exterior is often overlooked. But not by Patten, who ensures the entrance to her home also gains the holiday spirit so that everyone feels welcomed into her Christmassy home.

“I love everything about winter. I love snowshoeing. I love the great sweaters that come with the season. I think that’s why the most fun I have is decorating the front porch,” she explains, her voice growing wistful as she recalls fond memories of dressing up the porch in years past. “I love it because I can do everything real there – real greens, real berries. And I always put out old skis, antique snowshoes, and an old sled that was used by my two adult sons when they were young. I feel inspired by that; everyone should find their own inspiration at Christmas.”

Patten isn’t the only one who sees the pleasure in wrapping up the entrance in yuletide cheer. Even a simple wreath on the door offers a warm welcome to guests and gives a glimpse of what awaits inside the home, believes Bev Jensen, the owner of Lilibird (with locations in Bala and Bracebridge).

“A bunkie in the woods with a hanging

lantern beckoning, a simple evergreen wreath or rustic star on the door, and a pair of skis or snowshoes leaning on the porch rail readily evokes the feeling of Christmas,” she says. “Add a snuggly throw on an iron hook just inside the door, a big comfy quilt on the bed, a lantern on the bedside table for reading, mugs set out for hot chocolate and your guests will never want to leave!”

Nothing says Christmas in the country more than old fashioned enamelware and Lilibird has a great selection for the Christmas season. They can be used for décor – perhaps filled with crimson cranberries, the scent of fresh pine sprigs, or even poinsettia stems – or put to practical use. Having a big gang over the holidays? Why not percolate coffee over a fire outdoors and serve the whole gang with 36-cup red enamel coffeepot?

With Christmas, you don’t always have to go big. Often times it’s the simple things that put you in the yuletide spirit. After all, it’s not the Christmas tree of bushy wreath on the door that matters, but spending time with your family. As a result, there’s no shame in going minimalist, offers Jensen.

“Even die-hard Christmas lovers who have amassed a life-long collection of Christmas décor will sometimes come to a time when they no longer wish to have a full-size tree. Baby boomers who may now go to their children’s homes for Christmas

While Hilltop Interiors owner Lena Patten admits to going all-out when decorating her home, she does so strategically rather than haphazardly. There’s a method to her self-admitted merry madness. These photos are from her Rosseau store. On the previous page is featured one of the cottages she decorated for the season in 2014.



often choose to still decorate their homes but not as elaborately. Your home doesn't necessarily need the tree to be beautiful, warm and welcoming," she explains.

"You could choose to hang several collections of prized ornaments and crystal snowflakes from your light fixtures. In the dining room, living room and foyer hang gold and silver ones from white satin ribbons in various lengths and in the kitchen red and white ones which is more casual and reminiscent of your childhood. Small trees in a collection on a sideboard, mantel or entry table can evoke nostalgic Christmases of days gone by without the work of a large tree. Whether snow-laden evergreens in miniature or glass or acrylic trees lit by batteries are used, the impact can be dramatic."

"Christmas is now very much about lighting, and with all the new products on the market it's never been easier to give your home or cottage a wonderful inviting ambiance," Jensen explains. "The new battery powered replicas of old fashioned coal oil lanterns come in many different colours to match any colour scheme of the season, and can be used safely and liberally throughout the home or cottage, indoors and outdoors."

Battery powered Reallite candles, which have all the flickering beauty of real candles but without the fire risk of an open flame, can add the ambience of candlelight anywhere in the home and cottage. For example, placing of mass of candles on the porch or entry-way and then dimming the lights provides a memorable greeting to family coming over for an evening of merriment.

"The new lights on a fine wire, powered by batteries, can be used anywhere in your home to give sparkle to the most modest or grand display," Jensen continues. "Added to some sprigs of evergreen, a few pinecones and a candle in a hurricane, placed on a runner of burlap or wood slices glued to felt and you have the quintessential cottage Christmas look. Twine them through a bouquet of sparkly white boughs and the look is completely different."



Photos by Bev McMullen

Lilibird's locations in Bracebridge and Bala (pictured here) offer a variety of Christmas décor items to brighten up the season.

Christmas means something a little different to everyone, and therefore the way they decorate differs as well. Some prefer simple with little embellishments, while others – like Lena Patten – go all out in fabulous style, transforming her home into a magnificent setting of lavish decorations, sparkling colours and plenty of odes to the snow-hushed wilderness outside her door.

"The important thing is find a style that inspires you and reflects your version of Christmas," Patten says simply. "There are no rules."

Hilltop Interiors has a Christmas Open House on Saturday, Nov. 21; everyone is invited to come and perhaps find inspiration.



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