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Decorating

A PART OF THE CHRISTMAS EXPERIENCE

Article by Meghan Smith / Photography by Tomasz Szumski

Decking the halls, trimming the tree and hanging stockings with care are all parts of traditional Christmas decorating. Whether you like to spend hours getting your décor just so or have only a few selected decorations you choose to bring out, everyone has a process to get them in the spirit of the season.

"I love Christmas," shares Cathy Smith, Bracebridge resident and owner of Westlawn

Bed & Breakfast. "Anybody who knows me, knows I love Christmas. I love red. And I like decorating, too. I just go crazy at Christmas."

"I have a lot of handmade decorations and I put them up every year," says Lynne Quattro of Beaumaris. "I have a Father Christmas that was made by a friend. I like having special pieces to include."

The South Muskoka Memorial Hospital Auxiliary Christmas Home Tour visits seven

homes that range from new to old, mainly in Bracebridge. Homes are decorated for Christmas and participants visit each location in any order on their self-guided tour. All money raised goes directly back to the hospital to help with the purchase of equipment. Participants come from all across Ontario and both Quattro and Smith's homes were featured last year.

"My good friend is a member of the



Lena Patten and her team from Hilltop Interiors co-ordinate their Christmas decorating with the tastes of the family who owns a home, even rearranging existing pieces by adding a plaid throw to a chair to create a cosy, inviting feel.

hospital auxiliary and she asked if I would consider taking part," explains Quattro. "It was a lot of fun. So many people came through and they had questions about our home. It was a cozy and warm event."

"Last year, the committee asked if I would be on the tour again and I said 'yes,' as long as they thought it had been enough time since people had seen it," says Smith. "The house was on the hospital auxiliary tour

when the first one was hosted in Bracebridge eight years ago. It was like 'oh man, this has got to be really good,' so I really went all out. People like to see some of the old, traditional homes and experience some of that nostalgia at Christmas. Seeing a log house as well as a newer subdivision home helps give people ideas on how to decorate at Christmas."

Decorating takes time and not everyone has the time to dedicate to decorating their

entire home, or potentially more than one space. Several years ago, one of Lena Patten's clients dropped in and asked for help. With four kids, lots of extracurricular activities and living in Toronto, there was no way the cottage would be ready for the family to arrive on Christmas Eve and enjoy the holidays together. Patten asked how she could help, and since then has built a small client list of those who annually enlist her

Whether using a reindeer featured by Lena Patten (above) or Dickens-era figures in the home of Lynne Quattro (below), quality decorations are an integral part of the special touches they use.



help in Christmas decorating at their cottage.

"I started off just asking what it is they wanted or needed help with and its grown from there," says Patten. "I get the tree and put the lights on it, so when they arrive they can add their decorations."

With a busy family and living in a different location, it can be difficult to co-ordinate the details of decorating for the holiday season in the available time. Patten ensures her clients have a festive welcome when they arrive for their family time by including details such as poinsettias and switching out candles to red or white to add colour. Often families arrive on Christmas Eve or the day before to a decorated home and festively set dinner table.

"Everyone I work with helps and they're all seasoned cottage Christmas veterans now," laughs Patten. "We rearrange things each year to keep the décor interesting and new for our clients."

Patten and her team co-ordinate the family's tastes and existing home décor with

the festive, holiday décor they bring in. Even rearranging existing pieces, such as adding a plaid throw to a chair to create a cosy, inviting feel.

"The table setting is the most fun for me," says Patten. "I like to add a natural centrepiece with pine boughs and flowers, depending on the timing of the family's arrival and when the holiday is."

Choosing décor and even a single theme that appeals to your style is important. Christmas decorations should be no more flashy than your regular décor or style and should complement, rather than oppose existing home décor.

"I have some very traditional favourite decorations," says Quattro. "I love my carollers at the front entrance. My husband surprised me with them one year, which is unlike him, and I absolutely love them. They look much better here than they did in Mississauga."

The entryway is the first thing people see when they walk into a home. Ensure the entrance is decked out in the spirit of Christmas. A real arrangement with pine boughs and berry branches outside the front door also helps to create a Muskoka cottage feel for the whole setting right from the beginning.

"Make sure you have an outdoor arrangement," urges Patten. "It doesn't have to be elaborate but it's so welcoming for visitors. Tie a red ribbon or some burlap around the vase or planter to really add cheer."

"The front entrance is always key," shares Quattro. "We use things from nature. We have white birch in a planter all year but we make it festive at Christmas with pine boughs and lights. I have dried hydrangeas that I spray painted gold and they've lasted for several years. It's Muskoka. Bring nature into it."

Quattro decorates the common spaces in her home, including the dining room, living room, entrance, hallway and the bathrooms, and adds a few special touches to the bedrooms. Restricting the colours used in decorating keeps Quattro's traditional décor to gold and burgundy and pulls the entire home together.

"People always comment on how cosy our



home is at Christmas," shares Quattro. "We love having a fire, it's a wood-burning fireplace and we decorate the mantel quite nicely."

Decorations in Smith's home stay on the traditional side of the spectrum. She maintains a gold, silver, red and white colour palette and stays away from pinks, purple and blues. The décor often consists of hand-me-downs and antiques from garage sales that add uniqueness to the Christmas décor.

"I have stuff that's not just for Christmas, that I use year-round," explains Smith. "I have Christmas dishes, but a lot of stuff I use is just gold and white and a lot of silver, like my serving dishes. Some people get those items out special for Christmas but I use it all the time."

Keep it simple advises Quattro. Search for good quality items with good craftsmanship so they will last. She recommends sticking with things you like and decorate with what appeals to you.

"I don't think of myself as that traditional but I guess about Christmas I am," laughs Quattro. "I like well-made and handmade ornaments and decorations. I like picking things up at craft shows. I prefer to stick with burgundy, gold and white for everything."

In the dining room, Quattro sets a classic Charles Dickens village on the buffet. Once setup with cotton batting for snow and the lights on in each little home, the porcelain village is a perfect backdrop through Christmas dinner.

The exterior of Smith's home is as fully decorated as the inside. She's even heard, through friends of friends, that her home is known as the "candy cane house." She takes time placing greenery along the railings and wrapping large red bows around the white columns.

In addition to the outside of her house, Smith decorates four trees in her home - one tree in the carriage house, one in the parlour, one in the sunroom and a small table top tree on the dining room table, specially decorated with decorative silver spoons and hand-painted miniature china dishes.

The real tree, the family tree, is the special one in the Smith household. The real tree has all of the ornaments her kids made at school and all the special memories that go along with it. Smith's children and now



The traditional decorations Cathy Smith uses match the décor in her historic Bracebridge home.



A small table-top tree in the dining room is one of the four decorated, each Christmas, by Cathy Smith. It is adorned with decorative silver spoons and hand-painted miniature china dishes.

grandchildren come to the house after the Bracebridge Santa Claus Parade, every year, and decorate the family tree together.

"Now we kind of sit back and the grandchildren do it with their mom and dad's help," shares Smith. "They'll pull out something and say 'oh remember when I made this.' That's the tree that really means the most to everyone in our family."

Smith's key to decorating is planning and organization. During the fall and winter, Smith and her family travel to Florida but always come home for Christmas. Decorations are kept in labelled Rubbermaid containers and are brought out early, after Thanksgiving and placed in the corresponding rooms. Preparing and allocating time to decorate around events and other appointments allows for time to appreciate the process.

Set your table a few days in advance, suggests Patten. Thinking ahead and preparing helps to remove something from your list, so you're not worrying and have more time to enjoy the season. Gather the serviettes, candles, and cutlery together. Order flowers or make the arrangement ahead of time, so



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