

Designer decorations for a crafty Christmas

We're all going to be spending more time at home, so make this the year you finally chuck out that tinsel, says Olivia Lidbury

Christmas is undoubtedly going to be different this year. Uncertainty looms, but the fact that we'll all be spending lots of time at home in the run-up is a certainty. Which makes throwing ourselves into cheering up our surroundings a satisfying distraction. "The magic of Christmas is what we need at the moment," says Paula Sutton (@hillhousevintage on Instagram), who blogs from her glorious country home in Norfolk. "I'm putting my tree up early this year for that injection of joy."

Indeed, Joan Collins got so fed up waiting for December that she cracked three weeks ago and put her decorations up. And Lincoln-based content creator Charlotte Jacklin (@charlottejacklin) may well have buckled by the time you read this and got hers. "I've been having an argument with myself over when to start decorating," she says.

With many of us having a Christmas like no other this year, perhaps our usual decor might be ready for a little rejig, too. And without the usual social marathon to coordinate in the run-up to the 25th, that's a lot of evenings that could be spent making garlands, wreaths and planning place settings. Here, we've canvassed tastemakers, creatives and small business owners to inspire us to make our Christmas at home a little different this year - but in the best possible way.

DON'T GET STUCK ON A TREE

Um-ing and ah-ing about whether to go fake or real this year? You could bypass a bushy spruce entirely and still have something suitably twinkly or textured around which you can lay your gifts. Inspired by an image from Pinter-

est, this year La Basketry (labasketry.com) founder Tabara N'Diaye will create a *Paniers de Noël*, a triangle-shaped wall feature of stacked baskets that get smaller in ascendance. "It's so clever because you can add little trinkets inside and around them because of their shape, and it doesn't take up too much space, so it's ideal for small homes." Try it yourself with small hooks stuck on to Command strips so as to not damage your wall surface, and take comfort in the fact that if a pet gets its paws on it, then the trail of devastation is far less devastating than with a spruce. Interiors stylist Hannah Bullivant, who isn't pagan but enjoys celebrating the winter solstice on Dec 21, installs a large branch instead of a traditional tree. "I found a good one in my friend's bonfire pit and I'll use whatever we already have for decorations, so ribbons and shells and fairy lights and tie them all up. Admittedly, my children aren't as into it, so they have a small artificial tree that we bought from a charity shop."

...BUT DO CONSIDER WHAT'S UNDER IT

"My big focus this year is going to be my wrapping," says Ayshea McCormack, founder of ethically minded lifestyle online retailer The Small Home (thesmallhome.co.uk). "I'm only buying really carefully considered gifts and then adopting the Furoshiki method, a Japanese technique of using cloth and then tying something into the knot, like a decoration or a branch." McCormack has produced her own fabric wraps out of natural linens for The Small Home and wants it to become a firm family tradition. "It makes the tree look really considered and obviously it's reusable,

► Molly Mahon with her Christmas paper chains; Hannah Bullivant's alternative tree, left



CHRISTOPHER PLEDGER, RUI SCHROEDER, CAROLINE JONES





Try tying something into the knot, like a decoration or a branch

◀ Furoshiki wrapping by The Small Home; Tabara N'Diaye, of La Basketry, with her basket tree, right

too. The person receiving the gift feels really special and it's so exciting untying the knot."

CREATE AN ADVENT-URE

Advent doesn't have to mean fretfully grabbing a cheap cardboard calendar at the supermarket checkout (undoubtedly an "essential item" to a six year-old) on Nov 30, but nor does an alternative have to be expensive. Lisa Mehdene, founder of homeware site Edit58 (edit58.com), repurposes the apothecary cabinet that takes pride of place in her living room and transforms it into

"They still really love running down the stairs each morning to go find the relevant drawer"

an enchanting advent for her eight-year-old twins. Using a set of cheap and cheerful numbered gift tags from Ikea or Tiger she turns each drawer into a day. "When I started it, they were four and just the right height to be able to get into it, and I'd help them look for each number. They still really love it and run down the stairs each morning to go and find the relevant drawer."

Mehdene keeps the morning's surprise simple: "I'll put a chocolate coin or a Lindt ball and of course there's repetition throughout the month. They are pretty good at sticking to the rules of one drawer a day and I love that it's become such a visual part of our home." If you're not in possession of such a unique piece of furniture, then Bulli-

vant achieves a children's crowd-pleaser with another large branch off which she hangs "advent sacks" (hers are from Spanish interiors brand Numero 74). "I'll add a chocolate coin and a different family activity every day, she says. "In non-Covid times, that might be ice-skating or going up to Liberty to choose a decoration, but this year it'll be more home-based activities, such as baking gingerbread or watching a film." Bullivant and N'Diaye both orchestrate a "reverse advent", focusing on giving. N'Diaye fills up one of her huge baskets with one item a day that's then destined for the local food bank. "And if I'm entertaining friends, then I'll ask them to bring something too," she says. Bullivant's children are encouraged to gather unwanted toys and books into a box over the month that are destined for charity.

FORAGE FOR FOLIAGE

Foraging is an activity that can start in your own garden and supply you with an abundance of lush decorations for free. "When we're out for walks, we'll collect pine cones and dried seed heads and put them in vases on the mantelpiece, where they look great," says McCormack. Bullivant, who is running online wreath-making workshops (hannahbullivant.com/livewreathworkshop), also sources a lot of her greenery while out with her children and recommends weaving a rustic base with "any bendy vine, like clematis, honeysuckle, ivy, grapevine or willow and tying it with string, then add more greenery and top it off with a really big bow".

Sarah Kostoris, founder of linen brand Sarah K (sarahk.co.uk) starts gathering sprigs of holly and moss now.



Basket trees are ideal for small homes as they don't take up much space

DOORSTEP DELIGHTS

If a wreath on your door is a nod to the outside world that you're in the festive spirit, then what about adding something unexpected in your window? Lisa Mehdene hangs a cheery, red-nosed papier-mâché reindeer, which she stocks on her website (£65 each, edit58.com). "It's sweet to see the children outside point to it as they walk to school, and I think it's something that's pretty unique to us." She repurposes a pastel pom-pom wreath year after year (it also gets an outing over Easter) and gives it a seasonal twist with berries, fruits or cones.



"The holly, I'll position over the top of picture frames and use it as part of a garland over the mantelpiece, and the moss will cover the compost in pots of bulbs, narcissus and hyacinths, which I place around the house."

And take a tip from Sutton, who lays her foraged finds in her dark garage first to encourage all the bugs to crawl out, "otherwise your mantle will look like an insect circus!"

STAY TRUE TO YOUR STYLE

If you hate red, then there's no reason to have to tolerate it for a month each year. Impactful Christmas decor often has an unexpected twist to it, such as Sussex-based blockprinter Molly Mahon's marigold-hued Indian garlands, which hang either side of her fireplace. "They're so rich and warm and because of that they feel festive to me. I'm not stuck on green and red - I like jewel tones," Mahon says.

Jacklin continues the theme of her pastel pink and green living room through the festivities with complementary decorations and touches of gold. "I'm not afraid to admit that I like glitz and sparkle," she declares. "Last year, I had a gold fringed garland across my fireplace, and this year I'll add kitsch touches to the mantelpiece with a baby pink 1960s deer that I bought in Homesense."

Equally, McCormack's less-is-more look is echoed in her typically pared-back displays. "My own sense of Christmas isn't something that has been influenced by trends or what's current," she says. "Each year I go back to the same vintage baubles with their pretty patina and the effect is simple and a bit rustic, like the rest of our home."

MAKE YOUR DECOR EDIBLE

Food, when styled creatively, also provides effortless and edible adornment. "I dot tamegroute bowls around filled with nuts and sweets, and on the dining table I'll place large bowls of pears and berries because I love that abundant look - it's like overindulgence shown in decor," says Mehdene. Mahon loves the charm of pomegranates simply



▲ Decorations, above, and table settings, top right, by Charlotte Jacklin

positioned on a tabletop with lots of night lights. "They're not the cheapest to get hold of, but they're great if you need something last-minute, as they look so rich and opulent."

REMEMBER THAT SIMPLICITY CAN BE A GOOD THING

"Last year, I covered my tree in bows" says Charlie Porter, founder of online antiques emporium Tat (tat-london.co.uk). Good quality, grosgrain ribbon (try vvrouleaux.com for dizzying amounts of choice) tied on to branches looks traditional and requires far less storage



space. Ditto paper chains, "which I make from old newspaper. In fact, last year I used newspaper for everything, from paper hats to crackers, it's so easy and doesn't matter if you go wrong," says Porter. Paper chains are a signature of Mahon, who uses brightly coloured offcuts of her wallpaper designs and any scraps from her studio. "We do it every year because it's a fun one that the children can get involved in and the tradition is in the making: I'll put Classic FM on and we'll instantly feel festive." Kostoris favours a can of gold spray paint "I'll use it on dried seed heads from the garden and to make gold pears as a table decoration," she says.

...AND DON'T FORGET TO ADORN YOUR TABLETOP

"I go all-out with my table and I've been planning it for a while," says Jacklin. "I'm after a striped tablecloth this year to go with my cabbage plates, and I've also found a candelabra that I'll put pink and green candles in." For a sense of occasion, Sutton favours fabric napkins over novelty paper ones and has a collection of vintage napkin rings that she has collected over the years. "I get a sprig of holly or rosemary and place it in-between the napkin and the ring, which looks so pretty."

"Even tying brown string works, and you could add a craft tag with your guest's name handwritten on it and maybe add a little illustration to personalise each one." Sutton's own table will be decked with her collection of blue and white Spode crockery "because it looks instantly festive". "And it'll be covered in ivy and holly as if I've left the table outside - I love going over the top on Christmas Day," she says.