

HOLIDAY HANDBOOK: 52 STEPS TO A COZY COTTAGE CHRISTMAS

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Christmas Bounty

A Southern cottage comes alive with a family's holiday traditions.

BY TORREY KIM

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEVIN PALMER • STYLED BY LAYLA PALMER





FOR THE FIRST FEW YEARS AFTER KELLY GRAY MOVED INTO HER GEORGIA COTTAGE HER Christmas decorating plans changed from one winter to the next, with seasonal trends coming and going. But over time, she was surprised to realize that her vision didn't actually fit her family's lifestyle, and she decided to simplify and allow her décor to be dictated by one very important entity—her home itself.

"I came to the realization that home should first and foremost be a place that functions for your family, and it should also reflect who you are and where you are," she says. "Some people enjoy decorating with themes, but for me they were trendy—not reflective of us, and they were a great deal of work. My Christmas décor needed simplifying."

Four Takes on Christmas Trees

Kelly's decorating goals? "Keep things comfortable, casual and beautiful," she says. An example of that is the fact that Kelly centers her decorations around the classic holiday mainstay—the Christmas tree. "Scent instantly connects most people to a memory, and there is no scent that evokes Christmas memories stronger to me than that of a real fir tree," Kelly says. "So we buy fresh-cut Fraser Fir trees for our home."

Kelly usually brings home four fir trees so she can place them throughout the house to keep the Christmas spirit elevated. "We get a small one for the master bedroom that gets decorated simply with red

One of the four trees placed in the Gray household, this diminutive tabletop tree is decked with old family photos.

Above: *The gifts are coordinated with the décor for a cohesive look. Smart, stylish storage makes this area well-dressed and family-friendly.*

ribbon, a very small one for the playroom where we clip on photographs of the children, a 6-foot one for the back porch that has pinecones and a garland of some kind hanging on it, and a 10- to 12-foot tall one for the family room that is decorated with a mix of ornaments from our past."

Create Personal Casual Spaces for the Holidays

When they aren't sitting near the Christmas tree, the Grays can often be found gathered around the kitchen table enjoying holiday traditions, which have been ingrained in Kelly's memory since childhood. Keeping the traditions alive is important to her, whether it's watching holiday movies together or playing board games at the dinner table.

"There is no formal dining room here—our dining area is part of the kitchen," Kelly says. "I believe in keeping things casual, but I still want our table to reflect the holiday season and be functional for all meals. Who wants to 'un-set' a formal table in order to sit there to eat a bowl of cereal or to play a game of Monopoly?" she adds.

"I love the movie 'White Christmas,' and one of my favorite songs from it is 'Count Your Blessings,'" Kelly says. "That song inspired my holiday table setting this year. I used plain, everyday red dinner plates mixed with white numbered dessert plates. The table was covered with craft paper, and markers were put at each place setting. When we gather to eat, our family and friends can use the markers to write a list of things they counted as blessings. Then I'll date the paper, roll it up, tie it with twine and save it as a memento of one of the year's celebrations."

Savor the Sights, Smells and Sounds of Christmas

When it comes to creating a holiday atmosphere, Kelly's home wouldn't be complete without piping some Christmas cheer through the stereo speakers.

"We adorn our homes and towns with greenery and ribbon so that they look their most beautiful. We share—whether it is a meal or party with friends and family, or extra donations to charities," she says. "As long as I am able, I hope to continue to stay under its magical spell each and every December, and make a place where our family and friends can enjoy being under that spell, too." **KB**

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Heed These **Quick Tips** When Working With Greenery

Kelly Gray maximizes the holiday scents and sights in her house by using live greenery whenever she can. Here's how to easily and safely shape your fir boughs and sprigs into useful wreaths and holiday-inspired decorations:

1. As soon as you acquire the greenery, begin misting it daily with non-chlorinated water to prolong its life, and continue to do so until you're ready to take it down after the holidays.
2. Cut the branches using sharp shears at a 45-degree angle and wear gloves to avoid damaging your hands. Place the greens in water until you're ready to shape them—this will help them last longer.
3. Use floral wire to shape the greens into your desired shape and to secure the wreath or garland together.
4. Embellish the greenery with other natural elements, such as cranberries or pinecones.
5. Once you're ready to display your wreath or swag, don't hang it in direct sunlight—it could lead to an early demise.







3 Inexpensive Decorating Moves That Make a Big Bang

Have some jars lying around your house? How about Styrofoam? You have the makings of a few impactful and striking decorations that Kelly Gray uses in her home. She offers the following advice for decorators who don't want to break the bank:

- Group holiday items into big jars around your house—from peppermint sticks to gingerbread men—and wrap the jar with a holiday ribbon. “I keep a jar in the foyer with small bags filled with homemade spiced tea mix that guests can take when they leave,” Kelly says.
- Keep “snowballs” around the house for a festive winter glow. Kelly rolls Styrofoam balls in glue and artificial snow, and keeps them in her daughter’s room to maintain the holiday spirit.
- Don’t forget the small rooms. “I think every room should be reflective of the holiday, even if it is nothing more than a small vase with holly leaves or nandina by the bathroom sink,” Kelly adds.



Five Things Electricians Wish You Knew About Holiday Lights

You may be tempted to light up your whole neighborhood with your home's luminous display this Christmas, but you should resist the urge to rival the Griswolds. The following five tips from electrician Jeff LaCarrubba of LaCarrubba Electric in Fairless Hills, Pennsylvania, can help you ensure that you don't burn out your circuits this holiday season.

1. Make sure your receptacles are ground-fault protected. If it snows or rains on your outdoor lights, you don't want to risk electrical shock hazards by plugging them into nonprotected electricity sources. Look to see whether your outlets have "reset" buttons on them, which means they are GFI-protected. "If there's any question, a professional can test your outlets," LaCarrubba says. To further protect your plugs from rain, use an outlet with an in-use cover that can be closed after you plug in your item, and put electric tape around the connections between extension cords, he adds.

2. Lean toward LED lights. The newer ones use much lower wattage per amp than traditional incandescent Christmas lights, so you can get more lights on your home without the risk of overloading a circuit, LaCarrubba says.

3. Loading together too many plugs on one adapter increases your risk of heat buildup at the connection, which can either trip the breaker or start a fire, especially with older homes, LaCarrubba says. Instead, you should use multiple outlets so that the electrical current is distributed appropriately.

4. Holiday MacGyvers might be tempted to drill through walls to pass extension cords from one room to the next, but this is never appropriate, LaCarrubba says. "Everything in the electrical industrial industry has a UL listing (underwriters lab), but if you're using an electrical device for something that hasn't been UL-tested, you're putting yourself at risk. Extension cords are not designed to pass through or up walls."

5. If a package of Christmas lights indicates that they are for indoor-use only, heed that advice. Same goes for extension cords—do not use indoor extension cords in your yard.





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