

HOW TO:

Be a happy hostess

BY SOPHIE CONRAN

I OFTEN FIND MYSELF PLANNING FOR CHRISTMAS FROM MY DECKCHAIR while on summer holiday. Coming from an enormous family (I have six brothers and a sister, eight nephews and nieces, as well as my own two children), the logistics of getting everyone together can be overwhelming. But, because it rarely happens, I make sure I create a warm, welcoming home – not least because, in doing so, I might encourage them to stay long enough to do the washing-up.

In my house, decoration is a key part of the season. My cousin delivers Christmas trees, so that's a good start. I always get the bushiest, best-quality one I can afford; I love the blue spruce, but there are about eight varieties, so pick your favourite. Try and get one that has been freshly cut – the needles shouldn't be dry or dropping. If you can, saw a couple of inches from the trunk and keep it in a bucket of water, which will need topping up every day.

As for getting into the festive spirit, I love a wreath. I grew up in the country, where holly and ivy are in abundance. We'd chop it up into great prickly bundles and drape it around the door frames. As I now live in London, I might get slung in jail if I tried hacking at the local holly bushes. However if, like me, you live in a city, bundles of holly and ivy aren't hard to come by – I pop down to the local market or the Nine Elms Flower Market in south-west London. Use wire to attach bunches to your banisters, or twist the wire into a round



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and fit the greenery into it to make a wreath. Fairy lights attached to these kinds of arrangements look gorgeous and you can add an extra twinkle with gold or silver spray.

I get pretty carried away with wrapping presents, too. One year, it was bright green tissue paper with green silk ribbon and little papier mâché strawberries attached; the next, lilac tissue with purple velvet ribbon and velvet pansies. Last year, it was black paper with sparkly black ribbon and red velvet roses. For the kids, attach candy canes or foil-covered chocolates in the shape of trains, cars or butterflies. I get them from my brother's deli, Tom's, in Notting Hill. M&S also has a good range.

As for food, I've learned from past last-minute panics to be prepared in advance with well-stocked cupboards. I always make sure I've got a ready-cooked pie in the fridge – Waitrose does some great ones now, like the Delisante Artisan

Turkey and Ham Pie with Apricots. And, it may sound obvious, but there's no food faster than some delicious English cheeses, home-made chutney and a big crunchy salad, ready and waiting in the fridge for any hungry hoard of relatives.

Remember, too, that, if you haven't got time, there's nothing wrong with buying rather than making. Items like brandy butter are great from M&S, and no one will notice the difference. Most supermarkets sell decent ready-made Christmas puds now, too. Forget luxury products in these credit-crunch times – the Co-op has come top in recent taste tests.

One final thought: the perfect hostess is one who is happy and enjoying her guests' company, not one who is desperately making sure the baubles on the tree match her children's outfits. Just do what you enjoy with the time you have, in the company of those you love – and don't forget the cheesy music. ▶