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Safety first when stringing holiday lights

Holiday decorations help make a special time of year even more memorable. Whether you're hanging mistletoe above a doorway or decking the halls, safety must be a priority when decorating a home for the holidays.

Accidents can happen no matter what type of holiday decorating you're doing, but stringing holiday lights around your home may be especially dangerous. This season, keep the following safety tips in mind when stringing lights so this season of celebration starts off safe and sound.

- Work with at least one partner. Never go it alone when stringing holiday lights. Make sure someone is there to hold the ladder steady as you climb up and down. Partnering up when stringing holiday lights allows decorators to use both of their hands to climb up ladders instead of using one of their hands to carry lights.

- Once they reach a point where it's safe to hang lights, they can then have a



Safety should reign supreme when stringing holiday lights around the house.

- helper hand them the lights. If possible, work in groups of three so someone can hold the ladder steady at all times.

- Inspect lights before hanging them. Lights are not built to last forever, and over time holiday lights can suffer damage that has the potential to be dangerous. Wires can fray, and sockets can crack or break. Inspect lights and wires before hanging them, replacing any that pose a hazard. When replacing bulbs, be sure to replace them with bulbs of equal wattage.

- Use an extension cord of adequate length. Exterior holiday lights are of-

ten plugged into extension cords that extend to a shed or garage. Do not connect several extension cords to power holiday lights; instead, use just a single cord that's lengthy enough to reach the outlet. Connecting extension cords is a fire hazard. In addition, make sure the amperage of the decorations matches the amperage rating of the extension cord, which can be found on the product label or possibly on the manufacturer's website. Make sure the extension cord is not plugged into the power source while you are hanging the lights.

- Make sure lights do not pose a safety hazard in-

side. Some people string holiday lights indoors as well. Lights might be hung on Christmas trees or along hallways. Such lights and the cords connecting them to power sources should never pose safety hazards, so make sure they are not lying on the floor. Staple lights to the wall and never place them beneath furniture or rugs. Lights can overheat when placed beneath rugs, and lights that are not properly secured to a wall can pose certain dangers, including being potential tripping hazards.

- Hang the correct lights. When stringing lights, make sure you hang lights designated as exterior lights on the exterior of your home and those designated as interior lights inside your home. Hanging lights in the wrong places poses a fire hazard and creates additional safety concerns, so adhere to manufacturer instructions when stringing lights.

- Safety should reign supreme when stringing holiday lights around the house.

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Three great reasons to give homemade gifts

Nearly every holiday shopper has at least one person on their list who seemingly has everything. When shopping for such loved ones, shoppers often find the perfect gift to be especially elusive. While gift cards are a go-to fallback option when shopping for the per-

son who has it all, many gift givers feel such cards are a tad too impersonal. But in lieu of traditional store-bought gifts, shoppers stuck on what to buy should consider the many great reasons to give homemade gifts.

1. Homemade gifts show your loved one how much they mean to you.

Gift cards are practical, but they rarely elicit the warm feelings holiday shoppers want their gifts to produce. A homemade gift will show your loved one that you put time and effort into making their holiday season special, and that's something they will appreciate when they use or see the gift.

2. Homemade gifts



You can add a personal touch to your homemade gift.

won't break the bank. Holiday shoppers working on tight budgets likely won't have to break the bank to create a homemade gift. The Internet is a great resource for inexpensive homemade gift ideas.

3. You can control quality with homemade

gifts. Store-bought items are not always of the highest quality, and no shopper wants to give a gift that falls apart within a few days. By creating the gift yourself, you can ensure it's made with the highest quality materials so it will withstand the test of time.

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Holiday Guide

Remember to "Shop Local"

Minimize live Christmas tree mess

A Christmas tree is often the centerpiece of holiday decorating. Trees come in many shapes and sizes, both real and artificial. Those looking for a more authentic tree gravitate toward real trees, with their rich, earthy smell and beautiful boughs of green.

While the sights and smells of real trees are what draw many people in, live trees do require more maintenance than their artificial alternatives. Falling pine needles and sap are part of the live-tree package, as is regular watering and some initial tree preparation. However, those who have their hearts set on a real tree can employ some strategies to minimize the mess.

Buy a fresh tree

Christmas tree lots may begin to crop up before Thanksgiving, meaning trees will have been cut and shipped weeks before. The tree you put up in your home may be at least two months old by Christmas Day. Also, trees that are open to full sunlight at tree lots can dry out prematurely.

When shopping, look for trees that seem freshly cut and have good needle retention. Grab a branch and see if the needles



Face a tree's trunk toward the front of the car to prevent needles from becoming loose and falling off in your home.

remain intact. Give the tree trunk a bump on the ground and assess how many needles drop to the ground. Look at the color of the tree and determine if it is wilting. These may be signs that the tree is old and on its last legs.

Choose the right variety

Some varieties of tree have more staying power after being cut than others. So-called "true firs," such as noble, Fraser, Nordmann, and Turkish, usually last the longest.

Douglas fir, Scotch pine, balsam, and grand fir trees also last long after being cut.

Spruce trees, which are usually the least expensive variety on lots, may only last two to three weeks.

Wrap and transport

Ask the tree seller to freshly cut the bottom of the tree and wrap the entire tree in twine so it will be easier to move. Place the tree on the roof of your car with the trunk facing the front of the car. This way the wind will not fan out the branches and loosen up needles.

Choose the right location

It may seem like a good idea to put the tree right in front of a picture window, but if that window receives ample sunlight, the tree may dry out more quickly, leading to falling needles. The same can be said for putting a tree too close to a heating source, like a fireplace, radiator or heating

vent. A cool, shaded area is best for keeping trees fresher longer. Fit the tree in the stand while it is still outdoors and wrapped up and then move the entire product inside to the right spot. This helps minimize dirt, bark and needles getting all over the room.

Time your removal

Removing a dried-out tree can be a cleaning disaster. It's better for the tree to make its exit before it withers. A tree can drink a gallon of water per day, so make sure the stand reservoir is adequately filled. Over time, though, the tree may stop taking in water. When this happens, it is best to take down the decorations and get ready for removal. Hiding a tree disposal bag under the tree skirt can make it easier to get the tree out to the curb. Some people find there's less mess by clipping off the branches and removing them in one lump, rather than navigating a full tree through small doorways. Real Christmas trees can enhance holiday season ambiance and set the scene for the festivities to come. With the right care and prep work, homeowners can cut down on the mess associated with fresh trees.

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