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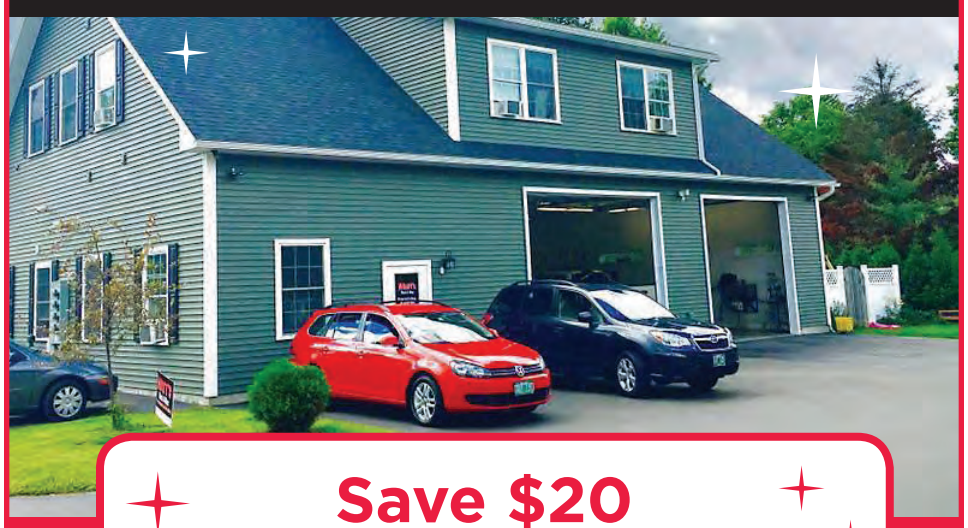
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How to make holiday wreaths the easy way

There are many different ways to decorate homes and businesses for the holidays. Tall evergreen trees are among the most visible symbols of the holiday season. However, wreaths hung on doors, windows or fences also are ubiquitous this time of year.

Wreaths adorn homes primarily during the holidays of Easter and Christmas. Wreaths have also been worn around the head or neck in ceremonial events around the globe for centuries. It is believed the first wreaths date back to ancient Greece and Rome. Members of the Greco-Roman society were known to hand-make ring-shaped items using fresh tree leaves, small fruits, flowers, and twigs. Oftentimes these headdresses symbolized a person's social status. Others suggest wreaths evolved to become a Christian symbol of immortality.

Regardless of how wreaths are viewed, many people like to display wreaths for the holidays. Wreaths can be purchased premade, but making a wreath on your own can make the holidays even more fun.

One of the easiest ways to make a wreath is to design it around a circular floral foam form. Gather supplies to make the wreath. For traditional wreaths, supplies will include sprigs of evergreen (real or artificial), ribbon, floral wire, bows, and artificial berries. Working around the foam form, arrange the boughs of evergreen, using the floral wire to wrap or pin into the foam itself. Keep the layers coming until you get the desired coverage. Embellish with a ribbon or place a bow.

The blog A Piece of Rainbow says that creating a wreath jig is an easy way to make a wreath. Cut a dollar-store laundry basket bottom from the top ring to make a template, on which you can place wreath-making materials so they keep their circular form. Use floral wire or natural jute string to tie the materials together. Experiment with fresh evergreen, twigs, holly branches, or whatever materials you choose.

Thick card stock also can serve as the wreath template. Attach artificial flowers or leaves, spray snow, ornaments, or other items to the card stock ring with a firm adhesive.

Many craft stores sell wreath forms made of natural vines that have been strung in a ring. These can be decorated in their entirety or left a little sparse to let the natural twine show through.

Wreaths may seem like complicated creations. But a little imagination and the right materials is all it takes to create a homemade wreath.

Keep safety in mind when decorating for the holidays

Decorations help make the holiday season a magical time of year. Stores are awash in color and twinkling lights, and similar imagery is on display in private homes.

Designing holiday displays can be a great way for families to spend time together and kick off the celebration. In fact, according to Electrical Safety Foundation International, around 90 percent of Americans decorate their homes for the holidays.

When trimming the tree and decorating this holiday season, families must keep safety in mind. A little planning and some precautionary measures can ensure displays are enjoyed all season long. Travelers Insurance offers the following holiday decorating safety tips.

- Do not overload outlets. Plan displays according to the number and location of available outlets.
- Never exceed the maximum number of light strands that can be attached together.
- Use lights and products that have been tested for safety. Certification marks like UL, ETL and CSA are from nationally recognized laboratories.
- LED lights should be used whenever possible. Such lights consume less energy and run cooler than other bulbs.
- The ESFI says candles start almost 50 percent of all decoration fires. Minimize the risk by using candles only when they can be monitored. Artificial candles can be used in place of real candles.
- Check for freshness in live trees. A fresh tree will last longer and is less of a fire hazard than an old tree.
- Place Christmas trees at least three feet away from all heat sources, including fireplaces and heaters.
- Use decorations that are non-combustible or made from flame-resistant materials.
- Pay attention to the age recommendations of decorations to see if they can be used in homes with young children. Some items, however common, are choking or strangulation hazards.
- Avoid putting small, "mouth-sized" decorations near the ground or on lower limbs of trees, where young children can easily reach them.
- Exercise caution when hanging decorations at high heights. Make sure the ladder is secured and have a spotter who can hold the ladder and pass items up safely.
- Outdoor electric lights and decorations should be plugged into circuits protected by ground fault circuit interrupters, or GFCIs.
- Exercise caution when decorating near power lines that extend to the house.
- Keep hung stockings far away from open flames so they do not catch any errant embers.

These are just a few suggestions for decorating a safely for the holiday season.





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Makes 25 to 30 small cookies

1cup unsweetened flaked coconut
1cup sweetened flaked coconut
8 egg whites
Salt
1/4 cup dried cherries
2 tablespoons butter
1tablespoon honey

1. Preheat the oven to 350 F.
2. Combine the unsweetened and sweetened coconut on a baking sheet. Lightly toast in the oven for 5 to 10 minutes. Keep close watch so the mixture does not burn, though you do want a nice toasted golden brown color. Remove from the oven and set aside to cool.
3. Reduce the oven temperature to 325 F. (If using a convection oven, leave at 350 F.)
4. Whip the egg whites with a pinch of salt in a medium bowl until the whites stiffen into firm peaks.
5. Fold the toasted coconut into the egg white mixture.
6. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Drop tablespoon-size rounds, perhaps using a small ice cream scoop, of the coconut mixture onto the baking sheet. Press one or two dried cherries into the top of each macaroon.
7. Melt the butter and honey together in a microwave on high for 20 seconds. Drizzle the mixture over the top of each macaroon. Sprinkle with a tiny pinch of salt.
8. Bake the macaroons for 20 to 25 minutes, until lightly browned (watch carefully to avoid burning), or for 8 to 10 minutes if using a convection oven. The macaroons should be dry to the touch. You may need to bake them longer if it is a humid day. If you live in a dry area, these will keep well for a week.

Chef's note: If you want to be really fancy, melt some chocolate and dip each one halfway into it.

Kids Corner

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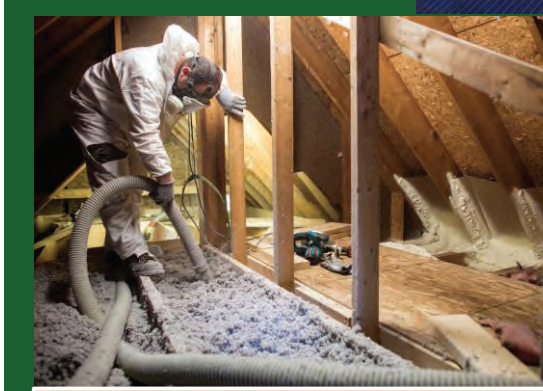


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How to create a durable gingerbread house



Gingerbread cookies and houses are one of the many symbols of the holiday season, alongside Christmas trees and twinkling lights. In fact, few confections symbolize the holidays more so than gingerbread.

Many a child (or a child at heart) has spent hours carefully trying to create decorative gingerbread houses. Although gingerbread recipes span various cultures, gingerbread houses originated in 16th century Germany. The fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel" helped solidify the popularity of gingerbread, which became part of Christmas traditions.

Even though gingerbread houses can be fun to make, there's no denying it can be exacting work — especially for those who strive for perfection. Prepackaged kits attempt to take some of the guesswork out of the equation, but those who are crafting from scratch can employ these tips as they build their gingerbread houses.

• Go for form and not flavor. Few gingerbread houses ever get eaten, so focus on finding a dough that will bake up rock hard as opposed to one that tastes good.

• Get the right icing texture. Pastry artist Catherine Beddall says royal icing is the preferred "glue" to adhere gingerbread pieces. Beddall says icing should be thick like peanut butter and not runny.

• Mind the dough. Do not roll out the gingerbread dough too thin or it may become brittle after being cooked. Always cut out shapes before the gingerbread is baked. Let the baked pieces sit overnight to cool completely before using them to build.

• Patience is key. Allow the icing to dry for at least a couple of hours after adhering each piece and before moving and handling the house, says Beddall. Work in stages so that individual items can be decorated and allowed to dry. Then the walls can be put together, followed by the roof pieces.

• Kids likely will need help. Children may not have the patience or steadiness to handle complete gingerbread construction. They can decorate the separate pieces of the house while the components are laying flat, which is easier for kids. Adults can do the main assembly later on.

• Utilize a template. Free-handing may not be easy. Cut out templates using cardboard or posterboard for various gingerbread pieces.

One of the most important tips is to have fun. Don't take gingerbread house making too seriously as a novice. Rather, enjoy the experience and the centuries-old tradition.



