

(Left) A striking contemporary offering from Howells. Take Deborah's advice and only use two colours to decorate your tree (Right) habitat's funky modern take on coloured fairy lights, mix and match with traditional white lights; and, if you don't have the time or inclination to make your own advent calendar try this Christmas tree design from Howells

Deck the halls

Interior design consultant and *DIY SOS* star **Deborah Drew** gives us her hints and tips to make the most of your home during the festive season



With the credit crunch still biting, most of us, probably even Santa and Mrs Claus, are tightening our belts – but this doesn't mean Christmas has to be any less special. Indeed this is the perfect opportunity to embrace that traditional festive spirit – you know, the one in which the family come together, make gifts and decorations and decorate the tree together. Indeed, with a few simple investments, good planning and a bit of creative flair you can turn your home into a veritable Christmas palace.

The perfect tree – real or artificial?

The appeal of a real tree at Christmas is quite understandable – the smell of fresh pine probably sits highly as one of the season's most aromatic delights. Combined with the scents of mixed spices, oranges and mulled wine, for some

this wonderful scent is essential for the perfect day and even though choosing the perfect tree each year brings with it a whole lot of hard work, some vow that artificial is not an option.

Strange really, as the good old artificial tree, along with being the more eco-friendly option, also brings with it no such fuss and bother, and you only pay for it once. No maintenance is required, forget hovering up endless needles, and it is simply packed away at the end of the holiday. The styles are endless and the fabulous sparkle of the pre-lit tree requires even less effort. And, if you just can't do without that 'aroma' then why not cheat and use pine scented oils and candles, available in most good home stores and supermarkets.

Christmas tree lights

Plain white lights have increased in popularity over the last ten years and were a welcome alternative to their multi-coloured predecessors. And is it any wonder, as they provide the prettiest sparkle to any tree. For something a bit different this year, why not try mixing two sets of lights, one coloured and one plain white; it just adds an extra dimension, warmth and a touch of nostalgia.

Don't miss the opportunity to put up your outdoor lights – I would recommend white lights for outside – homes always look so inviting when the gardens have that captivating sparkle. Visit local garden centres for the best bargains as well as some of the high street stores.



The advent calendar

Advent calendars are not only hugely traditional but are also a great way to get the children excited about Christmas. And, if cheap chocolate Teenage-Mutant-Bob-the-Builder-Tubbies calendars don't appeal there are plenty of other options. Firstly you can invest in a reusable calendar – saving the mad dash to the shops every year on 30 November – where you can fill the pockets or drawers with your own chocolates, sweets or gifts, or you could even make your own.

Buy 24 small glittery bags and tie tags to each one and number them from one to 24. Place chocolates or a treat of your choice in each one and position them randomly along the mantelpiece or sideboard; you could even hang them at different points around the house. The children will love searching for the right sack, and, of course, it will become a decoration in its own right – quite a focal point. I made one myself a few years back and it looks fantastic – there is just something so special about home-made decorations.

Baubles

For a sophisticated look, think about using just two colours when it comes to baubles, but be aware that some colour combinations can be cold, especially if you are using silver. Trees are readily available in white or black, which can



“Spend some quality time with the children and bake biscuits to hang on the tree”

create quite a bold statement when punctuated with two colours, but the look is definitely stylised so this look is best confined to an equally contemporary setting.

If, on the other hand, you are looking for a traditional, cosy look then it really has to be red, gold and green, or red, white and green – basically just get red in there somewhere.

Once the tree is lit and has been adorned with trimmings *then* it is time to dabble with baubles. It's quite a nice idea to collect these over the years, so each one carries memories from one year to the next. It does help if they are all roughly the same size, but I always think a variety of style is interesting, as you keep glimpsing different ones throughout the holiday season. Be aware of the weight of your baubles, as these can really test the branches of a real tree and it never looks great when the branches are bending downwards.

For childhood nostalgia head to the Disney Store where you'll find retro Winnie The Pooh or Mickey Mouse baubles at £5 each. There are also plenty of quirky decorations in the arcades (see our Editor's Choice for inspiration on pages 64-65) and at the Christmas Market in The Friary, which began trading last week and will continue right up until 23 December.

Or for a personal touch spend some quality time with the children and bake some gingerbread biscuits for the tree a week before Christmas. Decorate them with red and white icing and silver balls and hang them from the tree with pretty red ribbon – go on let the little



creative cooks loose with the icing.

The perfect day

And, when the big day finally arrives you will be content in the thought that you have created the perfect setting for all of that festive cheer – but, of course, inevitably there are more stresses to come.

To make everything run that little bit smoother why not invest in this year's fast-selling festive cookbook *Nigella Christmas*. It includes a whole host of Christmas culinary creations, including an 'At A Glance Christmas Lunch' plan, giving step-by-step tips on creating your family feast, as well as a Christmas Eve supper, which, you never know, may just be a possibility with guidance from the domestic goddess herself. It includes a fantastic Christmas cake recipe and for those who are not keen on Christmas pudding, indulge with Nigella's chocolate pudding alternative. She even has a recipe for edible Christmas tree decorations.

So, with garland draped along the mantelpiece, a holly wreath tied with red ribbons on the door, and some mulled wine on the hob, just make sure you don't forget that all-important mistletoe so you can reap the rewards of all those grateful kisses throughout those twelve special days. Have a wonderful Christmas. ❄️

For more inspiration this season from Deborah visit

(Left inset) Rossiters do fabulous cookie-cut-out decorations if you aren't a domestic goddess like Nigella (Below) Howells create a sophisticated look with this frosted black artificial tree, accented with metallic baubles

