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CHRISTMAS MEMORIES, OUR LOOK
AT THE SEASON'S BEST OFFERINGS

p.34

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Deck the mantels

THE FIREPLACE IS A FOCAL POINT FOR THE HOLIDAYS

BY EMILY HEDRICK
PHOTOS BY JASON E. MICZEK

In the marathon known as Christmas, trees have always run a fast, decisive race. But their decorative dominance is facing a strong competitor.

Behold the fireplace and mantel. Like the proverbial tortoise, the sometimes neglected architectural element may finally be coming into its own as the primary centerpiece when dressing up a home for the winter holiday season.

"The fireplace is the focal point of any room, regardless of the season," says Beverly Allen of Beverly Allen Interiors. "And if you had to limit yourself and spend your time and money on only one place, I'd recommend you go with it."

Todd Murphy, a special event florist and producer, loves the versatility offered by the mantel as a decorative showcase. He starts by creating a garland, using lengths of faux greenery to provide a supportive "spine," or base, into which he tucks fresh greenery such as boxwood, pine or cedar. This rope can be draped over a mirror, picture or flat-screen TV hung above the mantel, or on the mantel itself, cascading on either side. Next to go in: a variety of other fresh ingredients depending on his client's preferences, such as hand-tied bundles of herbs, citrus fruits, apples, or even quail and pheasant feathers. Then he might weave in some ribbon. And finally, he recommends adding battery-operated votive candles for the illusion of candlelight, or miniature twinkling lights, now available in LED bulbs.

"A beautiful garland should smell great as well as look great," Murphy maintains. "Including fresh fruits and herbs such as sage, lavender and rosemary adds texture, color and fragrance."

Taylor Johnson of F. Taylor Johnson Interior Design also loves using garlands, but is not averse to artificial ingredients. "We're not living in Williamsburg," where artificial decorations are not allowed, he points out. "Many fireproof materials are available now that we didn't have in the past." He also points out that live greenery can dry out fast, which might pose a fire hazard.

Designer Allen, on the other hand, is a purist regarding ingredients for her garlands, always insisting on live greens. She tucks the ends of the greenery into small containers of water hidden throughout the length to keep it hydrated. To keep them better anchored, she adds chunks of sponge-like foam of the type used by florists.

Mantel design by Ed Springs, Janis Young, Selina Swofford and Bo Henderson of Edward H. Springs Interiors, Inc.



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If a fireplace is 72 inches wide, Taylor Johnson recommends buying two basic garlands for the mantel. Into the garland, he suggests, can be added unusual tree ornaments, poinsettias, figurines of Santas, fairies and elves, fruit or any pretty item that holds sentimental value during the holidays.

Regarding color, the pros have varying opinions. Johnson maintains that "Christmas is Christmas. The colors of the room don't dictate what you use in your mantel décor," he says. Beverly Allen prefers the colors of the season: For dressier, more formal rooms, she uses gold and off-white with glass containers. For casual spaces she prefers red, green and a more rustic palette. Todd Murphy avoids clichéd red velvet ribbon, preferring textures in another color or even metallics.

What's on your mantel?

More ideas from the pros:

- Tall, clear cylinders filled with colorful glass balls
- Christmas cards from years past
- Toys from your childhood
- Christmas-themed eggs
- Topiaries of nuts, berries and pine cones
- Old-World ornaments by Christopher Radko
- Nativity scenes
- Decorative urns filled with holly
- Items from the Twelve Days of Christmas
- Items from your own religious tradition

Christina Britt Lewis of The Redesign Company is a big proponent of incorporating into the mantel display what one already has and loves. "Start in your own attic and back yard or walk in the woods to find ingredients," Lewis says. "I like natural and organic things. Switch things around for the holidays. Swap a painting above the fireplace with a mirror or another painting. Haul out your family heirlooms."

"People often err on the small side when they're decorating," she says, "but Christmas is the time to go grand!" For Lewis that might mean displaying one big fat bow in the center of the mantel. And as for color, there are no rules in her book. "If you love it, and if you already have it, it can work," she says.

Ed Springs of Edward H. Springs Interiors loves traditional garlands, wreaths and topiaries for the mantel that have no greenery at all. "We usually think of running cedar as 'the little black dress' of Christmas decorations," Springs says, "but I like to go with the 'wow' factor – something more unexpected."

"In our world – the world of design – the most important thing is scale. If you get the proportion right, you're home-free," he says. Still, he loves to use big, over-scale wreaths over fireplaces for their impact. On the other hand, he believes the colors of one's Christmas decorations don't have to blend with the prevailing colors of the room.

At Christmas, Springs believes that "if anything is worth doing, it's worth overdoing."

► More information
www.toddmurphyevents.com; www.lovecominghome.com



Decorations for this outdoor fireplace, located in Dilworth, were designed by Christina Britt Lewis of The Redesign Company of Davidson.

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