



Holiday Gift Guide II

Keep those holiday wreaths fresh looking

Wreaths may need some care to maintain their beauty all month long. Here are some tips to help holiday wreaths last as long as possible.

Choose a wreath wisely

When shopping for a wreath, choose freshly cut greenery that you assemble yourself; otherwise, look for wreaths made from freshly cut boughs with their foliage intact. Make sure not too many needles or leaves are falling off. Heavily decorated, preassembled wreaths may be convenient, but ornaments can make it challenging to give the wreath the moisture it needs to survive.

Moisture/water

Access to moisture will help to keep the wreath fresh. While a Christmas tree trunk may sit inside of a stand filled with water, wreaths require a little ingenuity. According to the wreath and garland retailer Club Botanic, if you will not be hanging a freshly purchased wreath right away, keep it in a plastic liner in a cool, dark place to help it retain moisture. Just make sure you don't seal that liner closed. Before hanging, lay the wreath in a couple of



inches of water for about an hour or up to a day so that the cut stems can soak up water.

Once the wreath is on a door or elsewhere, spritz it with water every few days to prevent drying out.

Location, location, location

Where you hang the wreath is key to its longevity. Wreaths and garlands hung indoors likely won't last as long as those hung outside, advises the floral retailer Bouqs.com. Evergreen boughs tend to require a colder climate to thrive, and indoor heat can prematurely zap moisture from the wreath. Using a humidifier indoors or misting the wreath may help.

It's probably best to hang fresh wreaths outdoors, but avoid direct sunlight, which can dry out the greenery. Slightly shaded spots are best. If your front door is bathed in full sun for hours, hang an artificial wreath here instead of a fresh one.

Maintain airflow

Another factor that can affect the wreath's longevity is an ample flow of oxygen. Wreaths tend to last much longer when kept on an outer door, indicates Harbor Farm in Ellsworth, ME. Wreaths sandwiched between a front door and a storm door will probably perish faster due to lack of oxygen.

Following these tips can help keep fresh wreaths as vibrant as the day they were brought home.

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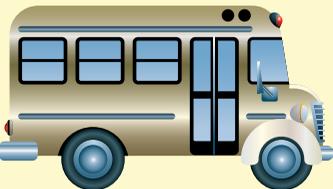
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Pair beer with food like a pro

This is the season for getting together, and just as wine can complement a variety of different foods when the right combination of flavors is presented, so, too, can one's favorite brew. The nuances of beer open up the possibility for many food-beverage combinations other than just with pizza and wings.

Craft brewers have opened our eyes to a much wider array of beer styles than may be available at the local liquor store or supermarket.

- **Blonde Ale:** Match this ale with lighter food choices, such as chicken, salads and light, nutty cheeses.

- **India Pale Ale:** The hoppy forward flavor of IPAs makes these popular beers a good pairing with strong, spicy foods or bold, sweet desserts.

- **Amber/Red Ale:** Pair a wide range of foods with amber ales, like chicken, seafood, burgers and spicy cuisine.

- **Porter:** The strong flavor of porter will work well with roasted or smoked food, barbecue, sausages or blackened fish.



- **Dark Lager, Dunkel, Schwarzbier:** Hearty, spicy foods, barbecue, and roasted meats also complement these dark beers, as do pizzas and burgers.

- **Hefeweizen:** Fans of this light German or Austrian beer will learn it pairs well with salads, seafood, sushi and traditionally weisswurst, a white Bavarian sausage.

- **Imperial Stout:** This beer can easily overwhelm many foods, but can stand up to foie gras or smoked goose. Long-aged cheeses, like gouda, parmesan or cheddar, also can work with stout, as do rich, chocolate desserts.

- **American Wheat Ale:** Choose this beer to go with very light foods like salads and sushi. It's generally too light for dessert, but might work with fresh fruit.

Furthermore, when pairing beer with food, keep in mind that beer with hop bitterness, roasted malt, high carbonation and higher ABVs balance sweet, rich (fatty) and umami flavors in food. Hop bitterness also can emphasize the spice of foods, such as in chili or certain ethnic cuisines. A sweet or malty beer balances out spiciness or acidity in foods.

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How to create a durable gingerbread house

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 if you're crafting from scratch, use 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.

A historical version of medieval gingerbread

Legend suggests that gingerbread originally landed in Europe in 992 with an Armenian monk named Gregory of Nicopolis, who brought a honey-and-spice cake to other monks in France, where it quickly became a favorite and was considered a "food from heaven." Historians are not really sure if the original gingerbread had any ginger in it at all. In fact, typical medieval recipes for gingerbread include no ginger and the French would later refer to it as spiced bread.

Gingerbread once was a treat only for the elite, but as the masses discovered it, recipes evolved to include soft cakes to hard biscuits and everything in between. The following recipe for medieval Gingerbread produces a chewy, almost candy-like texture with potent ginger flavor. Try it for holiday gatherings, courtesy of "Tasting History" (Simon Element) by Max Miller.

Gingerbread

Makes 20 to 25 1-inch pieces
 12 to 14 slices (238 g) stale white bread
 1 cup (330 g) honey
 1 tablespoon ground ginger
 3/4 teaspoon ground long pepper (a spice similar to black pepper but with more heat that typically must be ordered online)
 1/2 teaspoon sandalwood powder, or one drop of red food coloring
 1/2 cup (50 g) or less sugar

(enough for sprinkling)
 20 to 25 whole cloves
 Gold leaf

1. Either with a food processor or by hand, grind the bread into coarse bread crumbs. Commercially bought bread crumbs will work as well, though the texture from homemade bread crumbs is preferable.

2. Pour the honey into a large saucepan set over medium heat, and heat to a rolling boil; the honey will become like syrup. Note that it will boil up quite a bit, so do not use a small saucepan. Slowly add the bread crumbs to the honey while stirring. The mixture should come together and begin to pull away from the sides of the saucepan. Continue to mix until fully combined. Remove the pan from the heat and quickly stir in the ginger, long pepper and sandalwood, if desired. Turn the mixture out onto a sheet of parchment and spread with a spatula. Then, place another sheet of parchment and, with a rolling pin, roll the gingerbread out to about 102-inch thick (1.2 cm). Wrap in plastic wrap and chill in the refrigerator until stiff, about 2 hours.
3. Once the gingerbread is cool, sprinkle sugar on top and cut into 1-inch squares or whatever shape you like. Keep in mind that each piece should be bite size, as they are very strong. They will also be quite sticky, so handle them as little as possible. Insert a whole clove into each piece of gingerbread and fleck with gold leaf. Leave the clove in until serving, then remove it just before eating.

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It's time to **untangle** the holiday lights

The joyous holiday season is enhanced by the beautiful and festive decorations that adorn homes and businesses during this special time of year. Twinkling lights are part of the holiday decorating equation. However, tangled lights in storage bins and boxes can sap anyone's holiday spirit.

Christmas lights can turn into a tangled mess no matter how hard people work to avoid such an outcome. Christmas lights get tangled partly because of their design. There is a metal wire inside the cord to help with the packaging of the lights, which gives the cord a natural curve. Furthermore, most light cords are made from twisted or braided wires that have spaces throughout. The lights themselves can get snagged in these pockets between the wires.

Although it can be frustrating to deal with tangled lights that look like balls of yarn in a knitting basket, there are ways to disentangle them



with relative ease and then pack them in a way that can reduce further tangles.

Begin by plugging all lights into the

outlet to see if they work. If most of the bulbs are burnt out or the lights do not go on at all, discard the strand. There's no point untangling lights only to learn they don't work.

Start slowly, beginning on the plug end, when untangling the lights. Keep the strand you're working on separate from the other lights so they do not inadvertently become entangled. Tackle this job in a space with a lot of room. Lay the lights out on a large table or sit on the floor to do the untangling.

Utilize a pen or pencil to fish out more stubborn snags. This can help you loosen any knots and make it easier to pull snags through.

Lay the untangled strands out in a safe area away from your working space as you work through each strand.

One of the ways to avoid the hassle of tangled lights is to remember to store the lights in ways that will

reduce their propensity for tangling in the first place.

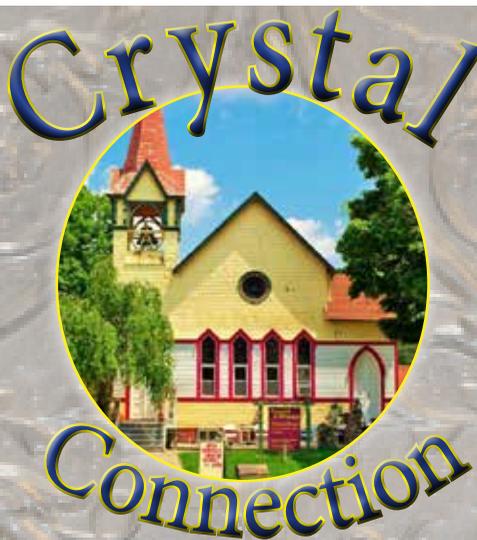
- Rather than wrap lights around your hand or arm to condense the strand, use something else. A piece of cardboard, a hanger and some PVC tubing can keep lights from becoming tangled.

- Store lights in a zip-top bag to keep them from tangling with other strands stored together.

- Save the original boxes and return the lights to them after each use.

- Icicle lights have hanging strands of lights on longer strands, which can compound tangling issues. Use a rubber band to gather the hanging icicles together, or use some plastic wrap for the same purpose.

- Invest in a cord reel, similar to what you might use for a garden hose. Longer light strands or wires are stored on such reels, and they can be used with Christmas lights.



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Going local during the holiday season and beyond

The spirit of giving is alive and well each December, and that can extend to giving back to your community.

Shoppers could patronize small local businesses over big box retailers and national chains. The decision to do so can benefit their communities.

- Small businesses inspire young entrepreneurs. The United States Department of Commerce reports that nearly half of all small business owners in the U.S. were 54 or younger. Six percent of those owners were 34 and under. Young entrepreneurs at the helm of thriving local businesses provide inspiration to the next generation of innovators.

- Thriving small business owners send a positive message to traditionally underrepresented groups. The National Women's Business Council Annual Report for 2022 indicated women-owned employer firms increased by nearly 17 percent between 2012



and 2019. Similarly, the U.S. Census Bureau's 2021 Annual Business Survey found that there were more Hispanic-owned and minority-owned businesses in various sectors than a decade earlier. The success of women and minority-owned businesses sends a positive message to young entrepreneurs and locals

who have traditionally been underrepresented in business. That helps to create a more diverse and inclusive Main Street.

- Social gatherings with friends and coworkers are a big part of the holiday season. Choosing a locally owned restaurant or tavern instead of a chain restaurant can have a ripple effect on an assortment of local businesses. Local restaurants often source their ingredients from local farms. A family meal at such a restaurant benefits both the restaurant owner and the hardworking local suppliers of the food that ends up on the plate. Local restaurants are more likely to list locally produced wines and craft beers on their menus than national chains. That adds to the ripple effect of celebrating the holidays at a locally owned restaurant.

A thriving small business sector is vital to a strong local economy.

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