

BETTER BY DESIGN HOUSE FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Oregonian, The (Portland, OR) - Thursday, December 6, 2001

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PROBLEM: It's that season again. Long lines at the post office, crowded malls and the ever-growing credit-card bill. How's a person supposed to be jolly?

SOLUTION: Greet the holidays with a party. A simple combination of good friends, good food and the right atmosphere will keep spirits high long after the party's over. Timesaving decorating tips from some experienced party-givers can take the panic out of entertaining.

DETAILS: Forget the fuss, says Richard McQuerry, a holiday decorator and custom floral designer. A simple holly sprig in a vase or placed on a table adds a subtle touch in any room in your home. For more impact, let a potted amaryllis do the job. Big, shiny magnolia leaves dotted with pine cones will add warmth to the mantel. Don't overlook the obvious: Fresh, fragrant evergreen boughs on a coffee table or a wreath on the door are unmistakable, and easy, signs of the times.

SMOKE AND MIRRORS: Designer Shirley Roggen relies on what she has on hand to deck out her dining room table. It becomes a giant centerpiece.

Here's how she does it: Start with a plain white tablecloth, some wide (3-inch) green ribbon, gold cord, a few candles and gourds. Run the ribbon the length of the table. Lay gold cord on top of the ribbon, letting it dangle over the table edges, and tie knots at each end. On top, place gourds, pears or apples (spray paint them white or leave natural). Finally, add a couple of tall tapers and sprinkle glitter or tiny stars over it all. Now you've got the makings of a real celebration.

Roggen doesn't ignore less-obvious areas. For one, she tucks poinsettias underneath tables with tall legs. And in the shower, a poinsettia goes behind the glass doors until the party's over.

EVERY DAY IS A PARTY: Come Dec. 1, Karol Niemi is ready to celebrate. That's when her grand holiday table cover comes out. The black-and-gold striped cloth and sheer black topper with gold dots recasts her dining room with its glittery presence. "I never get tired of it because it goes away on the first of February," she says.

She also breaks out three 4-foot-tall round topiary frames for the holidays. Wrapped with silk ivy and tiny gold bows, they hold even tinier ornaments.

But the party doesn't start until votive candles illuminate every surface of the house, with clusters of them glowing on counters, windowsills and the dining room table. "They add a beautiful sparkle to everything," she says.

GOOD SCENTS: Don't forget fragrance, decorator Tennys Enders says. "It enhances any decor." Greet your guests with a big bowl near the front door piled with whole lemons that have been pricked to release their scent. Next to it, place a bouquet of aromatic cedar branches and let the two mingle. "Nothing says the holidays more to me."

WHEN RED AND WHITE FEELS TRITE: Instead of traditional bold holiday colors, decorator Ruth Bath trims her home in colors that signal a harvest mood, including rich gold, pewter, bronze and reds. "It makes people feel comfortable," she says. "It also

enriches the celebration beyond Dec. 25."

Touch everything in the house with a little color, she says. Tying a big satin ribbon around a plant container will accomplish a dressier look. Add pizzazz to the chandelier by covering the chain with fabric -- a rich piece of velvet wrapped around the chain and fastened with metallic cording or ribbon sets a festive tone.

Now, dim the lights and let the party begin.

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Caption: 4 Color Photos by SERGE McCABE - of The Oregonian staff

Edition: SUNRISE

Section: HOMES & GARDENS OF THE NORTHWEST

Page: 24

Record Number: 0112040094

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