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DESIGN

## How to Avoid the 5 Worst Holiday-Decorating Mistakes

From poorly scaled Christmas trees to a slavish devotion to green and red, architects and interior designers share the goofs they see most often—and what to do instead

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**IN THIS HISTORICALLY** strange holiday season, we're counting on tinsel's historically documented ability to inspire cheer. Fine artist Josh Young, whose photos of his tastefully decorated Washington, D.C., townhome have earned him a loyal Instagram following, believes that, in 2020, when "we aren't with loved ones, we aren't with friends," it's especially important to "spruce up and create that holiday environment."

That said, he's over the over-the-top approach. "Holiday decorating should accent and complement the rest of your décor and not overpower and compete with it," said Mr. Young, who added fresh greenery to every room this year but skipped ribbons and lights. The focal point: his larger-than-normal tree adorned with vintage ornaments.

**A huge tree can 'swallow up all the Christmas cheer in the room.' Just as when buying furniture, measure first.**

Reckless festooning is just one of the common Yuletide décor gaffes that make design pros cringe. We asked our panel to share must-avoid errors and the decorating strategies that are their preferred alternatives.

### 1. Knickknack Attack

Too many cute snowmen or winging seraphim get tacky fast, warned Ashley Moore, founder of Moore House Interiors, in Tomball, Texas.

**Instead** It's OK to showcase the Nativity scene passed down from Mom, said Miami designer Constanza Collarte. "The key is to use figurines meaningfully." When it comes to

her own treasured items, she keeps kitsch in check by layering them into a centerpiece and laying the table with modern Murano stemware and vintage monochrome-patterned Staffordshire plates. No holly motifs.

## 2. Ill-fitting Tannenbaums

Miami designer Phyllis Taylor often sees trees so gargantuan they “swallow up all the Christmas cheer in the room,” or tabletop varieties so dinky they “provide a holiday atmosphere...for one.”

**Instead** Measure beforehand as you would when buying furniture. If you have high ceilings but can’t fit a wide berth, “pick a slender tree so that it’s properly scaled for visual impact, the taller the better,” suggested Ms. Taylor. Group tabletop trees together so they don’t look lonely, she added.



THE RISE OF ROSE Pink decorations, like this glass teardrop ornament, provide a pleasing break from the traditional colors of red and green.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

## 3. Gross Faux Greenery

“There’s a lot of bad garland on the market at a tempting price point,” warned Toronto designer Tiffany Leigh Piotrowski, who dislikes synthetic boughs’ suspiciously dark green coloring and telltale smell. Even worse, said New Rochelle, N.Y., designer Joy Moyler, are

pink or silver trees that try, and fail, to make a virtue of looking fake.

**Instead** Buy the real deal. Alternatively, Billy Ceglia, a designer in Sandy Hook, Conn., attaches live magnolia leaves or holly berries to artificial garlands to “add interesting texture...fill in bald spots and increase believability.”

#### **4. Overcompensating for Kids**

Households with babies or destructive pets often leave bottom tree branches bare for safety. For Los Angeles designer Rydhima Brar of R/terior Studio, that move “makes it look like you’re half-assing the tree.” Allison Spampanato, head of design for Pottery Barn Kids, notes that parents often think “plastic fantastic” decorations are the only safe option.

**Instead** For that lower half, “look for unexpected fabrications that are timeless, cozy and festive,” said Ms. Spampanato. She suggests ribbons of alternating colors, origami-paper ornaments or shatterproof acrylic “that looks just like mercury glass.”

#### **5. Ye Olde Green, Red and Gold**

Pledging allegiance to the classic color scheme can make your home look like it’s about to play host to a mall Santa or serve as the set for a crazy-making Hallmark Christmas movie.

**Instead** Melissa Morgan of San Antonio’s M Interiors leans on simple greenery with lots of lights to evoke “a dreamy Scandinavian forest.” She also likes to nestle red or white amaryllis, poinsettia or paperwhites in blue-and-white pots. Alternatively, tweak the traditional hues and rely on pink and pale green.

## LEAVE GNOMES ALONE / The worst yuletide décor gaffes our pros have witnessed



ILLUSTRATION: THE ELLAPHANT IN THE ROOM

**I have a client** who loves gnomes—potentially charming in small doses, but they have many. I’ve had dreams of those gnomes coming alive at night, they are so creepy. —*Phillip Thomas, designer, New York*

**I’m seeing** holiday trees in rooms around the house with individual themes—like safari, country-western/cowboy, teddy bears—or ones that honor a sports team.” —*Melissa Morgan, designer, San Antonio*

**A childhood** friend’s parents thought it was a great idea to hang two small, live bunny rabbits in cages on the tree. They kept nibbling on the branches, finally tipping the tree over, narrowly escaping the lit fireplace.” —*Joy Moyler, designer, New Rochelle, New York*