

DESIGN

8 Holiday-Decorating Mistakes —and How to Fix Them

From wilted garlands to overly neutral palettes, the missteps design pros see when homeowners celebrate the season, plus the best ways to remedy them



GORGEOUS FORAGE A colossal wreath, featured in 'Terrain,' by Greg Lehmkuhl and Caroline Lees (Artisan), includes found branches and evergreen boughs. 'Keep in mind that perfection isn't the goal,' said Mr. Lehmkuhl. PHOTO: ISA SALAZAR

By Catherine Romano

Nov. 23, 2018 9:32 a.m. ET



DINING-TABLE CENTERPIECES that crowd out place settings, scented candles that trigger headaches, and robotic adherence to red-and-green color schemes even if they clash with your décor—these are some of the holiday-decorating gaffes that drive design pros crazy. But the experts we consulted didn't just spout Grinch-like criticism: For every complaint they lodged below, they offered a tasteful workaround.

UNBLANK SLATES: “I see clients fill their interiors with holiday décor before putting away their everyday decorative items,” said New York designer Laurence Carr. “The result is overbearing.”

THE FIX: “Guests feel invited into the heart of the home if you simplify the [scene] and punctuate it with meaningful holiday décor.”

CLICHÉD HUES: “Traditional holiday color schemes—Christmas equals red, green and white, and Hanukkah means blue and white—are overused,” said Kristen Ekeland of Chicago design firm Studio Gild. Fiona Leonard, a Darien, Conn., designer, pointed out that introducing red and green into some homes “creates a jarring, clashing effect.”

THE FIX: “Gold and silver metallics, cozy whites, furs and neutrals or rustic patterns are all great alternatives,” said Ms. Ekeland.

DESICCATED GREENS: “I often see fresh wreaths and garland not properly prepped,” said Naples, Fla., designer Renée Gaddis. “In a short time they become dry and brittle.”

THE FIX: “Soak garland and wreaths for 24 hours in a tub of water, drain and air dry,” said Ms. Gaddis. “Once dry, spray them with plant preserver such as Wilt Prof.”

VISUAL CONGESTION: “With tinsel, glitter, bright colors and lights, I always feel that holiday décor can turn out disastrous without a little preplanning,” said Boston interior decorator Taniya Nayak.

THE FIX: Set up vignettes around meaningful pieces, she suggested. “Give your displays a little breathing room between each set.”

MISGUIDED SOPHISTICATION: “Often I see homes that feel a little cold and sterile due to a limited, neutral palette,” said London and New York designer Martin Brudnizki.

THE FIX: “The holidays are an excuse to be kitsch,” said Mr. Brudnizki. “From choosing the right crackers, preferably patterned, and colored glassware—the accent of red adds to the festive mood—to mixing in metals like gold, which always works well on the table, the holidays were made for a little more adventurous home styling.”

OPPRESSIVE PERFUMES: “Overpowering scented candles are very unappealing,” said Los Angeles interior designer Lisa Lerner.

THE FIX: “Pick one that’s made with either soy or beeswax and a high concentration of essential oils,” Ms. Lerner recommended. “They give off a natural scent.”

TOO-BLUE BULBS: “Many people unknowingly buy LED lights without considering the temperature of the bulbs,” said Sag Harbor, N.Y., designer Allison Babcock. “White blue-hued LED lights not only create a cold feeling, they are often hard on the eyes.”

THE FIX: “Cast a warm light by purchasing LEDs with a temperature of 3,000k or less.”

ROTE REPETITION: “A big mistake people make is not changing up the way they decorate with the same holiday items each year,” said New York designer Libby Langdon. “After a while people get burned out because it becomes a chore.”

THE FIX: “Reimagine a new design with the same decorations,” she advised. “Just because you had a garland over a door last year doesn’t mean you can’t drape it over a mantle or down the middle of your dining table this year.”