

REAL ESTATE | DESIGN

How to Avoid the 7 Worst Holiday Table Decor Mistakes

Chic decorating ideas from designers and entertaining experts, who identified the Thanksgiving table gaffes they see most often, and what to do instead



FALL FLASH A table by Nashville's Reed Smythe & Co. is festive but turkey-free.

PHOTO: REED SMYTHE & CO.

By [Rebecca Malinsky](#)

Nov. 10, 2021 9:30 am ET

FOR MANY AMERICANS, Thanksgiving will mark the first time they are setting the table for a holiday dinner party in quite some time. So we won't judge when a host positions the dessert fork where the butter knife should be. But some decisions are key to guests' comfort. A cornucopia that blocks sight lines across the table? A big no. Personal place cards to head off the confusion of seating arrangements? Absolutely. Here, our panel of design and entertaining pros share the mistakes that can derail a holiday dinner party before the turkey even hits the table, plus recommendations for keeping your meal on track and your décor memorable.

1. Too Much of a Good Theme

A table needn't be covered in brown and orange linens, pilgrim figurines and gourds galore to make the evening feel special. “We are eating the turkey,” said New York interior designer Elizabeth Gill. “We don’t need to see [plates] adorned with turkeys too.” **Instead:** “To create a festive feeling, focus more on the season than the actual holiday,” said Vancouver interior designer Gillian Segal. She suggests incorporating underused fall colors like merlot, bringing in orange through citrus fruits instead of pumpkins and tucking a pheasant feather into each napkin ring.



FRUIT FLAVOR A seasonal table by Atlanta interior designer Lauren E. Lowe incorporates autumnal orange through citrus instead of pumpkins to keep the table from feeling too holiday-specific.

PHOTO: MARY CATHERINE BROWNFIELD

2. Overcrowded Tables

A surplus of decorative objects will crowd both the victuals and the visitors. “Pumpkins, ornamental trees, cornucopias, flowers all take up space,” said Kendall Wilkinson, a San Francisco interior designer. “Don’t overwhelm the table, or your guests will be silently fighting for space.”

Instead: “Set out functional items you will need to accompany your meal first so you can see how much space you have to work with for centerpieces and candles,” said Atlanta interior designer Lauren E. Lowe.



SLIM STEMS Treadwell, N.Y., candlemaker Jenifer Green incorporates narrow taper candles at different heights to create a dynamic table without crowding the center.

PHOTO: C.HARDER

3. Disposable Décor

A Thanksgiving feast deserves better than paper plates, says our design panel. “Going to the trouble of making such an important meal and then dishing it out on a flimsy plate is just sad! For the cook, the food and the guests,” said Joanna Buchanan, a home-décor designer based in Wilton, Conn.

Instead: You don't need fine china to set a beautiful table, Ms. Buchanan argued. "Start with white china from Crate and Barrel, and then layer with mix-and-match thrifted plates for a super eclectic vibe." Anne Rainey Rokahr, founder of Trouvaille Home, a shop in Winston-Salem, N.C., agreed: “A special tablecloth, candles and a single floral arrangement is far more special and doesn't ravage the environment.”



BLUES YOU CAN USE This blue and white marbled plate from Reed Smythe & Co. shows how everyday tableware can be made festive with sterling silver, seasonal flowers and an autumnal tablecloth. No need for throwaway, holiday-themed pieces.
PHOTO: REED SMYTHE & CO.

4. Overly Precious Settings

While many of us have been waiting years to dust off Grandma’s wedding china, don’t feel the need to use every teacup and dessert spoon. “I hate tables that look too studied,” said Palm Beach, Fla., interior and textile designer Mally Skok. “All the plates and glasses don’t need to match. It shouldn’t feel like you are eating in a restaurant or a hotel.”

Instead: To knock back the preciousness of your china, Ms. Skok suggests colorful Italian water glasses, which can be affordably sourced from [Etsy](#), and mismatched jugs and vases that homes accumulate over the years. If kids are in attendance, New York City home-goods designer Kim Seybert suggests parking little chocolate Thanksgiving figurines at children’s place settings. “Make it fun and whimsical,” she said.



FESTIVE NOT FORCED A holiday table set by Mountain Brook, Ala., designer Jeremy D. Clark eschews a traditional matching service in favor of mix-and-match tortoise-clad flatware, coral plates and spongeware.
PHOTO: ROB CULPEPPER

5. Sky-High Centerpieces

“Nothing is worse than a tablescape that is too tall for conversation,” said Ms. Segal. The usual culprit: tall floral arrangements.

Instead: Many designers suggested setting a low, linear garland or a row of bud vases down the table’s center. “One of the most gracefully simple tablescapes I’ve had the pleasure of dining at was adorned with simple rosemary and persimmons,” said Los Angeles interior designer Maya Williams.



LOW LUX Wayne, Pa., designer Eddie Ross set this formal table with a low arrangement of garland and dahlias, allowing guests to converse across the table.

PHOTO: JASON VARNEY

6. Seating Miscalculations

“A common mistake when hosting a meal is either trying to squeeze too many people around a table or spreading them too far apart,” said Caroline Downing Nadel, Founder of London home-décor company Wicklewood.

Instead: If all guests are vaccinated, the relative intimacy of a happy medium is best. Ms. Wilkinson suggests carving out 24 inches for each guest. “The placemats, decorative chargers, napkins and all utensils should fit within that footprint,” she said. Ms. Downing Nadel cautions that if you’re combining tables, be sure they are the same height. Then choose table linens that will cover the seams, and layer a table runner across the entire length to create a cohesive surface.



ELBOW ROOM A tablescape by Nashville, Tenn., design company Table + Dine leaves breathing room between place settings, spreading flatware wide as a guide.

PHOTO: DANIELLE DEL VALLE

7. Extraneous Scents

The only aromas coming from your holiday table should make your guests’ mouths water. Pumpkin spice candles or cinnamon-scented pine cones create unappetizing olfactory confusion.

Instead: Save such potent accessories for another area of your home, said New York interior designer Michael Cox. Their fragrance “can be overpowering and distract from your holiday feast.” The best scents, he added “are those that emanate naturally from a great meal cooking in the kitchen or a freshly cut Christmas tree.”



SMELL TEST San Francisco style and design writer Erin Hiemstra decorates a Thanksgiving table with seasonal fruit, gourds and unscented florals, allowing the food to carry the aroma.

PHOTO: STEPHANIE RUSSO/APARTMENT 34

Holiday-Table Horrors

Design experts on memorable missteps



A REAL TURKEY A living, breathing bird as decoration? Ick.

PHOTO: GUY SHIELD

“A Thanksgiving host put a live turkey on the table as part of the décor. Not only did the turkey take up all of the space at the table, it left unwanted ‘gifts’ everywhere.” —*Vero Torres, co-founder of Casa Felix, Miami*

“All the guests were given pilgrim hats on their chairs to wear for the evening. Absurd.” —*Carleton Varney, president of Dorothy Draper & Co., Palm Beach, Fla.*

“A friend lamented his decision to display floral bouquets in hollowed-out pumpkins after they started oozing all over the table.” —*Keith Meacham, co-founder of Reed Smythe & Co., Nashville, Tenn.*

“Décor incorporating glitter or flocked pieces that flake off and stick to your guest’s favorite cashmere sweater leaves no one happy.” —*Jeremy D. Clark, interior designer, Birmingham, Ala.*