3 PROVEN TIPS TO CRAFT THE PERFECT HOLIDAY TABLESCAPE

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CTW FEATURES

You're planning the perfect holiday dinner. Guests have been invited, the menu is prepared — with allergies and dietary preferences accounted for – and decorating is last on the list. There's a lot of care and attention that goes into holiday decorations, but it's easy to overlook one important space when setting up for the season: the dining room table. This is the area that will set the mood not only for dinner, but also for the rest of the evening.

"The dining room table is the heart of holiday entertaining, so don't underestimate its importance in your decorating plans," says Stephen Brown, author of "Glitterville's Handmade Christmas" (Andrews McMeel, 2014).

Since this is where guests will enjoy the most memorable aspect of the party, a festive tablescape will be the perfect complement to dinner. Follow these experts' tips to compose a beautiful display that will leave a lasting impression.

1. Use natural elements

Bringing the great outdoors inside will make for a stunning tablescape that won't break the bank. Natural materials provide a neutral base that has the flexibility to be taken in different

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directions.

Melissa Fenlon, co-founder and editor at the DIY and lifestyle blog Alice & Lois, recommends a woodsy look. To achieve this, find pieces of reclaimed wood at flea markets, thrift stores or salvage yards to use as a base.

"Then begin to layer your natural textures on top of the wood – start with eucalyptus, then begin to add pomegranates, air plants and, if you want more color, go for kumquats, too," Fenlon says.

Another possibility is to create an earthy feel like Shannon Smith, a Washington, D.C.-based interior decorator, likes to do.

"I always start with a garland of greenery — magnolia branches, eucalyptus, pine boughs, etc. — and I like to run the garland down the center of the table," she says. "It adds a natural element that is so classic and fresh."

To determine which approach you'll take, put together an inventory of materials you have immediate access to — maybe gourds from your garden or twigs and leaves from the backyard — as well as other items from around your home that you can

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repurpose. Develop a color palette based on what you have, and then pick out complementary pieces at a local florist, craft store or in the produce section of the supermarket.

2. Preserve all pieces

Organic materials do decompose, so it's important to take the right steps to preserve them.

First, you'll want to get rid of ants and other critters. Smith recommends baking twigs and pinecones and submerging delicate items, like leaves, in a vinegar bath. Once everything is cleaned well, you can employ a few different methods to help with preservation.

If you want to display sliced-open fruit, it's surprisingly easy to pull off.

"Brush them completely with a light coating of egg whites to seal all of the exposed edges and prevent the air from getting in," Brown explains. "Then sprinkle with superfine sugar." His secondary method is to dip each piece in paraffin wax, which will add a nice sheen as well.

Painting is another preservation technique that adds a deeper layer of interest to natural décor. It could be as simple as white-painted pumpkins offset by gold-dusted twigs and pinecones.

Try applying it to other elements as well. Smith suggests creating place cards by spray painting leaves, and then using a paint pen to write guests' names on them.

3. Add festive flair

As beautiful as natural elements are, they often can be drab on their own and need contrast to create a lively display that's fit for the holidays.

"The key to successfully decorating with natural materials is knowing when to add some sparkle and shine," Brown says. "Add the luster of a few silvered baubles, glass glitter or anything that reflects some light, and the natural materials become magically sophisticated!"

You can create even more interest throughout your tablescape by playing with height. Smith recommends using tall candlesticks and taper candles of varying colors and sizes, as they won't be too intrusive in cross-table conversation.

When your tablescape is completed, select a few bold elements – something colorful or a standout item – to weave into the other decorations around your home. Keep it simple, though, so that your dining room table can be the star of the party.

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