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Oh, Christmas Tree!

How to make it look amazing without breaking the bank.

Coming to you from the desk of Sue Lake-Harris - Christmas planner of many years.

Most homes have one Christmas tree in the living area, or possibly in a large entry hall, or even at the foot of a beautiful staircase if you happen to have a two-storey house.

There's nothing to stop you from having more than one tree if you like. In an old cottage I once lived in, I placed a 4-foot tree with twinkly lights and child-delighting kitten and puppy ornaments in my bedroom window. I chose that position because it was the only window that could be easily seen by passers-by. My 8-foot tree went into the lounge room where it could be seen by people who entered the property and came to the front door. There was also a large shelf in one corner of my dining room which had been made open plan with the kitchen, so I put another 4-foot tree on the shelf. And if you think that's a lot of trees, I have another friend who loves Christmas as much as me, and he has lots of trees and a plethora of ceramic villages, wreaths, garlands, you name it. His entire home becomes a Christmas showcase. But I digress...

Today we will talk about planning one tree – around 6 feet tall – artificial (but the same decorating principles will apply for a live tree).

Most artificial trees these days are fuller than ones from the 1970s and 80s, and most have a bottle-brush type of arrangement to give the effect of pine needles. They are much improved over the moulded plastic versions that used to fall off. They aren't, however, as full as a genuine Douglas fir, for example.

There's a company in Australia called *Balsam Hill* (originally from the US and still operating there too!), and their trees are incredibly full and life-like, some arrive with lights already built in, you can get them from small to super-tall, and even slim-line for tight spaces. They have a half-tree option too so there's less of an impact on your floor space, but you still have room underneath for presents. It's worth going to their website to look at the various types of trees and how they've been decorated as inspiration for you – and then if you have the disposable income and you want one of their trees or other decorative items, go for it! And there's no affiliation with me at all, no kick-

back, nada, zip. But they are in Australia, and that's great. You can check them out here: https://www.balsamhill.com.au/

There's another company I've found online that operate out of Melbourne, and they look pretty good too (at least in the pictures – I don't know anyone personally who's bought one of their trees). Still, if you're looking for a new tree, a *Jingle Jollys* tree might be an option. It looks like they don't sell directly to the public, so if you do a search online, you will see loads of re-sellers for them, which means lots of competition on price! They have similar size options to Balsam Hill.

Of course, I'm not advocating buying a new tree if you don't need one. And there are ways you can very effectively, and at reasonable cost, make your tree look fuller if it's just that aspect that lets it down a little…

Think 3D

Most of us only decorate towards the outside of the tree. One of the best tips for a better looking tree is to hang some things further in towards the centre. I'll explain in detail later, but this includes lights and decorations. This means, when you look at the tree, your eye is drawn in – there is some depth of field to what you're looking at.

Another point, aside from your tree-topper, small decorations are up high, and they should gradually increase in size as you move down the tree. This gives an illusion of the tree being taller as well.

Think Height

If you have the ceiling height, elevate your tree so that the tip is near the ceiling (allowing space for your topper). When we're little, one of the major beauties of trees is the whole "looking up" experience. We get a little of that back as adults by having the tallest tree we can in the space available. The family's current tree (because of our move, we call it our *interim tree*), is only a 6 footer – we used to have an 8' one but after 20+ years, it was donated to a theatre group, as it still looks great from a distance, but was beginning to be a little tired close up. We have high ceilings in our home, so I put the tree up on a sturdy square lamp table to elevate it.

Think Theme

We looked at decorating the house more generally before, so whatever theme or colour scheme appealed for that, you should plan your tree so that it's a continuation of that, or at least complements it in some way.

Starting Your Tree Decorating

The first step is preparation – if your tree could do with looking a little fuller, then you need to go shopping for one or two items before you start.

If possible, take one of the smallest branches from your tree to one of the shops near you that sells Christmas decorations. What you're looking for is a garland (if your tree is 6 feet tall or larger), or matte tinsel for shorter trees. You're trying to find a shade of green that's as close as possible to your tree's overall tone.

If you find a garland that's not too thick – say, approximately the same diameter as a tin of 440gm beans – and one that's a little thicker again. You need these for a tall tree. Most garlands come in standard lengths of 180 cm (about 6 feet). Occasionally, you'll find one that's 300 cm. the 180 cm length ones work fine for this project.

Matte tinsel in dark green or something close to your tree colour is best for shorter trees. You'll find a 3 metre length will probably do.

Now, get everything together in one cleared space near where the tree is to be displayed. You need:

- The tree
- The garlands/tinsel
- Tree lights and power board
- Decorations
- Ornament hangers (these resemble opened up paper clips or double-ended hooks – green works best with green trees as they tend to "disappear"). If you don't have any, you can open up normal paper clips, or use the coloured plastic-coated ones if you like.

In my lounge area, which is almost square, I unbox the tree in the centre of the floor so that I can easily move around it. Most trees require the stand organised first, then a "trunk" placed in the stand. Lastly, branches are placed into holders on the trunk and these are usually colour-coded in size bundles. This is so each row of branches as you work your way down the tree are the same size. If your tree is like mine, work this way...

1. Put the stand in the centre of the room, add the trunk.
2. Separate all the branches into their size bundles.
3. Take your garland (small diameter one) or matte tinsel. Where the top section finishes on your tree, tuck one end in securely. Now wind your garland or tinsel down around the trunk. Try to avoid covering the holes where the branches will go in. If you have excess when you get to the bottom, you can make that a little thicker, or you can cut off the excess.
4. Starting from the top of the tree, work your way down, attaching branches.
   DO NOT fluff out your branches yet.

5. Step back, and walk around the tree. Is it leaning to one side? Are the right size branches in the correct places? Does the garland/tinsel look fairly even, or if not, does it taper from the top to a little broader at the bottom?
6. Make any adjustments but don't fluff out branches yet.

Your tree may be different, but most artificial trees have a short top section that has permanently attached thin branches that need to be separated out so that you can then commence decorating. Go ahead and open up this top section, but don't do the other branches yet.

Once you're satisfied your tree is basically straight, it's time to make your tree look fuller by giving it that 3D approach.

Fluff out the garland only (if you used one).

Get your lights out. Make sure they are untangled and test that they work (if you've planned this out previously, you'll have already done this step).

Take the end light of the string and hold it between your index and middle fingers of your non-dominant hand (i.e., your left hand if you are right-handed, or the reverse). Loosely loop your string of lights over your arm, or using your elbow if you want to "coil" them. Your loops need to be about the same size so that you can keep control of the coiled section.

When you get to the bulb that's nearest the plug, stop coiling. At the back of the tree, take that last light and using the lead, push in towards the middle of the lowest branch at the back and loop the lead around the branch with most of it on the floor neatly tucked up close to the tree so that you don't step on the plug while you do the next part.

You will now walk around the tree, laying the light cable over the top of the middle of one branch, then putting a loop on the middle of every second branch as you go – don't have too much tension – you need there to be just a small droop in the light string between branches which will allow adjustments later if need be. The loops over every second branch help keep your light cable near the middle of those branches. For the alternating branches, you can tuck the cable into a section of pine needles.

When you get back to where you started, go up a row and repeat the process until you have worked your way up to the top (don't do the very top that will be covered by your angel or star or whatever topper you'll use).

If you have excess lights, you can continue walking around the tree, but bringing the lights down and starting to put them towards the outside of the tree. If you run out of lights, finish that string with a loop over the branch where the string runs out. Start a new string of lights from that branch.

To start a new string, do the coiling as before. Grab the plug end and push drop it down from where the other string finished. Again, you start with the light nearest the plug and work your way around. Excess lights can be wound around the bottom of the trunk. Or you might want to use them sitting on top of your tree skirt for additional effect. If that's the case, get a ziploc bag or zippered pencil case and pop the excess into that, closing the top. This keeps the excess easy to manage until the tree is in position and the tree skirt goes on.

If your tree is tall, you may need a step ladder and a second person to hold the coil and hand you the lights as you work your way around the tree.

Circling the tree the way I've described makes it easy to find your way back when disassembling after Christmas.

Move your tree into position and plug your lights into a powerboard. If you're lifting a tree onto a table, ensure you have one hand on the lower section and one on the upper section of the trunk. If you don't, the two poles might come apart and undo most of your hard work. If the tree is heavy or very tall, two of you should move it into position.

Turn your lights on and set them to steady mode (winking and blinking and flashing and chasing settings will drive you nuts while you try to do the rest).

Here are your next steps…

1. Fluff out all the branches. Pay particular attention to the 3D aspect we talked about earlier – start from close in to the trunk and work your way out. It doesn't matter if some lights are partially hidden as it adds to the overall effect.
2. Think of your tree as having quarter sections – identify the front, the back, and the two sides.
3. Decorate the tree. Remember what I wrote earlier about using bigger items at the bottom and smaller items at the top. Create some transition zones. In other words, allow some smaller ones to creep into the middle zone, and a few middle ones into the large zone, etc. Don't put really large ones at the top – it makes a tree lop-sided looking.
4. If you don't have bucket-loads of decorations, you can afford to be sparing at the back of your tree. You need a few items there as part of the whole 3D effect, but you don't need your best ones, nor do you need lots of them.
5. Empty spaces between branches where fluffing out the pine doesn't really fill a large gap, you can fill by hooking two hangers together to drop an ornament a little lower down, for example, to get the best position to fill the gap.
6. To increase the sense of depth, don't just put items on the tips of branches – put some further back into the tree. Partially obscuring them is fine and adds something to the overall charm.

7. If you have limited decorations, buy some curling ribbon in colours that work with your theme/scheme. Tie lengths to the bottom of ornament hangers. Curl the ribbon. Use the curled ribbons to fill gaps inside the tree and keep your better ornaments for closer to the outside. This is an inexpensive but surprisingly effective option. The curling ribbon catches the light and looks very pretty.

Our first Christmas in our new town when we were renting, everything was in storage interstate. We bought an inexpensive tree from Kmart, lots of curling ribbon, some glittery gift tags, and some tinsel that was close to the colour of the tree. We bought one set of lights. Following the steps I've outlined above, we ended up with a really beautiful tree, all done at low cost. We kept all the tags and ribbons. The tags were used on gifts the following year, and the ribbons were also recycled – on the tree to fill gaps.

You might wonder why I went into such detail this week – so you can plan! Put some time aside to go through your decorations, determine your scheme or theme, work out what you need to buy or make, throw out what's broken, etc.

A Note on Lights

You can never have too many lights! Just kidding – but this is one occasion where more sometimes is better.

As a general rule, 100 bulbs for every foot of height on the tree as a minimum. So, a 6 foot tree looks pretty good with 600 lights. I use about 1000.

Here's a tree from a couple of years ago that has about 800 lights. I hadn't completed tidying up the leads, but you'll get the drift of it. You can see that it really helps to have lights spaced out fairly evenly on the tree.

Once your trees are up for this year, I'd love to see some pics! I plan on videoing my tree decorating this year as a resource so you can get a better idea of what I've described here.

Have fun thinking up some great ideas for your tree, and don't forget to put some time aside in your planner to:

- Sort decorations
- Test lights

See you next week!

Sue