

Have yourself a very homemade Christmas

Whether you are a skilled crafter or you just want to create something unique for your festive celebrations, the trend for a homemade Christmas is white hot right now. Christine Penhall meets four Essex experts offering some excellent inspiration

PICTURE the scene. It is Christmas in the idyllic homestead of the fully-fledged festive goddess. The Christmas cake was prepared months in advance, over the last few weeks gifts and cards have been expertly fashioned for friends and family, and all that is left is to meticulously hand-tie some unique decorations for the trees (yes, plural).

While few of us would place ourselves in this picture of pre-Christmas bliss, more and more of us are looking to pick up the skills of a five-star Christmas crafter, ready to dip our toes into the world of the homemade Christmas. And whether or not we reach the dizzy fairy heights of the festive goddess or not, there is a growing trend towards making our celebrations homely and wholly unique.

Craft shops are now full of the various tools to make your own decorations, and if you type Christmas food gifts into your search engine you will find hundreds of recipes for treats such as pickled pears, spiced arancillo and cinnamon biscuits. You can even knit a Christmas jumper and support a charity by buying a pattern from Save the Children.

The Decorations

Christmas as we know it has its origins in Victorian Britain and many attribute part of this to the influence of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. In 1848, The Illustrated London News published a drawing of the royal family celebrating around a decorated Christmas tree and soon many

homes had one, adorned with candles, sweets, homemade decorations and gifts. So, where can we get the inspiration to make our houses a little more unique in December?

Sharon Creates of Ongar-based Christmas Essence has worked on Christmas lighting for ►



Fireplace decorated with lighting by Christmas Essence



HOMEMADE CHRISTMAS

prestigious London streets such as Oxford Street and Regent Street, internal dressings for venues such as The Shard and residential properties of the well to do, as well as decorating two homes for last year's TOWIE Christmas special.

'My mum was an inspiration for Christmas,' Sharon explains. 'She would start planning in August and collected magazines for years for ideas. Some people find Christmas a real chore, but every year I decorate every corner of the house.' And while the trends change each year, people do have similar tastes. Sharon adds: 'Last year it was lime green, whereas this year it is all shades of green. Some people only want red or gold, and there is a lot of rustic this year too. We go out into the countryside with a wheelbarrow and load it with anything from conkers and acorns to leaves and holly. We weave it using ribbon or rope, or spray paint it. Some people aren't creative, so we are there for them.'



Sharon Creates' Christmas tips

Forage! Acorns on the branch are best, plus pine cones.

If they haven't opened to let the seeds out, putting them on a radiator will do the trick.

Buy cans of white, silver and gold spray paint.

You can transform anything with a can of glitter and some glue. Water down the glue, dip a pine cone in it, then in the glitter, shake it and it's done!

Have a base colour for your colour scheme.

If you have a red carpet with gold, use gold as the base for the bigger decorations, then have a red ribbon so the eye is drawn to the tree and not the carpet.

Above: A beautifully lit festive garland by Christmas Essence

Right: Find a stress-free Christmas lunch

Below: A handmade Christmas card



The Cards

Sir Henry Cole, head of the Victoria and Albert Museum, commissioned the first Christmas cards in 1843. Today, this personal touch is important to many and home card making is hugely popular.

Marion Emberson owns Sugar and Spice Crafts at Barleylands in Billericay and started crafting as a little girl. The appeal is simple, she explains: 'It is made by you for someone – it's personalised. If they like pink, you can make the card in pink. You can also put people's names on things. These days names often have more than one spelling, so getting it right on a mass produced card can be difficult. This kind of touch makes a big difference.'

'This year people are producing a lot of

Marion Emberson's Christmas tips

Always keep it simple

Set time aside and have everything ready to go.

Put your details on the back of the card saying, 'handmade by...' You may get some orders off the back of it for next year!

cards with embossing powders and simple designs. Stencils are also a trend as well as dye cutting. Christmas cards have to be simple but effective as you are making a lot and they have to look good. For new ideas, I browse through Pinterest and American magazines. Don't copy things, just pick different elements and merge them into a unique creation.'

The Food

The ritual of the Christmas feast began before the Middle Ages. Still a centrepiece of the celebrations, supermarkets provide as many ready-made treats as we wish, whether it be own brand mince pies or a top of the range Heston Blumenthal Christmas pudding.

For the ambitious Christmas cooks there are festive cookery courses all over the county where you can improve your skills. Ex *Masterchef* contestant, Ann Hood, runs the Smart School of Cookery, which teaches people to cook stylish and tasty dishes with no fuss. And how about this for taking the strain out of Christmas dinner? Ann explains: 'One of our most popular recipe ideas at this time of year is our Stress Free Christmas Dinner which is designed to be prepared and cooked within two-and-a-half hours.'



Ann Smart's Christmas tips

Don't buy the biggest turkey you can find. A smaller one is more tasty and juicy and if you buy the right size it can cook in just one to one-and-a-half hours (3kg) if you spatchcock. Buy another one for Boxing Day if you need more.

Vegetables should take no longer than three to four minutes. Use a peeler to make ribbons of carrot, toss them in rapeseed oil (try my ready to cook oils with a hint of rosemary, seasoning and garlic) and pop them in the oven at 200°C for three minutes.



Bridget Metcalfe's Christmas tips

There are a lot of books to inspire you, plus the internet is a great place to pick up ideas. **Don't panic** that you won't make a good job of it – just start! It's surprising how effective you can make things look. If it goes a bit wrong, I always think it adds to its charm. **Keep it simple** until you're more confident to create more elaborate gifts.



Some examples of Bridget's homemade gifts

The Presents

BBC Radio presenter Bridget Metcalfe is a seasoned creator of personalised gifts and established Arts and Crafts Circles in Chelmsford and Ongar in 2005. She began making presents when she was a child.

'We would make simple decorations from coloured card, lots of glitter and pretty ribbons,' Bridget explains. 'I always loved the idea that I was making things to add to the decorations which my family had owned for years.'

'Now I make jewellery; mostly bracelets and rings,' she continues. 'They are all made from beads and each one is unique with its individual little silver twists of beads and charms. I like to make gifts in someone's favourite colour or which I know will match their personality.'

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