

HOUSE RULES

t h e p o d c a s t

Episode 12: The Secret to Simple Christmas Decor

I'm Myquillyn Smith and this is House Rules.
Welcome to Episode 12.

Years ago, I made a Christmas garland so colossal and heavy it fell off the fireplace twenty minutes after I'd put the finishing touches.

Halfway through putting together the garland, I knew I really didn't like the way it looked and the only solution I could come up with was to add more stuff until it looked right. I made multiple trips to Hobby Lobby to buy more things to fill it in. All in the name of having a Christmasy home, and all while I secretly longed for simplicity. When it was done, I thought the garland was pretty-ish, but it was so complicated that it required a lot of time to make, and the fake greenery, heather, and pretend berries cost me more than I wanted to spend. Even hanging it took a lot of effort, especially since I had to hang it twice because it fell. And then, of course, I had to pack it all away just so I could do it again next year. I knew there had to be a simpler way to make my home feel Christmasy. But I was afraid that more simple would mean less festive, and that didn't seem fair to any of us. I wanted a festive Christmas and a festive Christmas home that felt cozy and in keeping with the season, but I had no idea how to get it. So, I figured I must need more stuff.

I didn't understand that if I had first prepped my home for the winter season, I wouldn't have felt the need to overdecorate for Christmas. If the thought of thoroughly decorating and decking the halls has ever felt more like a burden to you than a blessing, you are going to love this seasonal approach to decorating for winter and Christmas.

By the end of this episode you'll have five simple steps to winterize your home decoratively, so that your home will feel in keeping with the season November through March.

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If you listened to Episode 2, it was called “How to Decorate for Fall Without the Fuss”, this is all going to sound very familiar to you.

Instead of focusing on decorating for Christmas this year, what if you first considered preparing your home for winter. I don't mean getting the insulation for your pipes ready or salt for your walkway. I mean decoratively: considering function and cozifiers for your home for the upcoming winter season. It's a really nice first step to decorating for Christmas, because when your home is ready for the season it's automatically ready for the holidays and the celebrations within that season.

Now, of course I know some of you have already put your tree and your Christmas stuff early and there is no shame in that. The point is for everyone to enjoy the season and be able to create a seasonal and holiday home that they love.

So, next week, I am going to talk about Christmas decor, but today we're treating Christmas as a celebration that comes in the season of winter. And like I just said, when your home is ready for winter you're going to be freed up to prepare for Christmas in a more simple and meaningful way.

You can winterize your home from Thanksgiving through springtime, but Christmas decor is limited to a holiday that sometimes can feel only 3-4 weeks long. Focusing on getting your home ready for winter first means that you can kind of spread it out. You won't have to exhaust yourself pulling a bunch of storage bins out of the closet or garage only to fill them back up and put them all away three weeks later. Unless you just really want to do that.

But before you start adding some winter elements in your home, I want you to first think about the two approaches to decorating for every season. Your mindset will guide all of your decisions, so it's really important to start with the mindset that honors your values, your beliefs and your goals this year. Most of us haven't experienced anything other than a consumer-style winter, especially when it comes to decorating, but there is another option. The still, quiet, unobtrusive creator mindset might be just what you need this year. But I'm going to let you decide.

Sometimes I feel sorry for winter. In a world where the stores seem obsessed with providing us with fall decor, spring decor, and summer decor, most overlook winter and only focus on Christmas. Don't get me wrong, I adore Christmas. And as a Christian I'm all about celebrating the birth of Christ. But when it comes to decorating our home with a seasonal mindset, retailers are taking advantage of the importance of Christmas and hoping to convince us that we need to buy a bunch of stuff to make it special.

We've been trained by stores, advertisers, and, well, even our own selves to believe that it has to be borderline overwhelming when it comes to decorating at this time of year. And of course

the way we try to achieve our winter-wonderlandy, deck-every-inch-of-the-halls goals is by adding layer upon layer of pretty winter and Christmasy store-bought goodness.

Over the years, I've relied less and less on store-bought decor, but it's still important to me to have a home that feels seasonal and Christmasy. Here's the secret. God's already laid the groundwork for seasonal change, and it starts with creation.

We've had only one big snow at our house in the past few years, but after growing up in Indiana and Iowa, nothing makes me feel more wintery than a fresh blanket of snow, or at least the thought of one. I currently live in North Carolina, and even though we don't get a whole lot of snow where we live, it's cold enough for the leaves to fall, and then the only sign of life left in our yard are the magnolias and pine trees.

The empty deciduous trees and brown grasses are seasonal reminders of the importance of dormancy and rest. They're also a visual reminder that we are in a season of waiting for something more — a season of Advent, a season of preparation. This is a time when the night is longer, and I even remind myself to pay attention to that darkness, to sit with it, instead of trying to make sure that every single light in my house is on and banish the dark. I'll let my house be darker in the wintertime.

I like to start with what winter feels like to you.

You might already know this, but for every season I like to create a Pinterest board for that season, usually with the outdoors in mind. Because let's face it, the seasons are what happens outside and it's the changes that get our attention. So to remind myself of the winter that I long for, I think it's helpful to create and look at my winter Pinterest board. I encourage you to do the same. What type of winter do you long for this year? You can create your own board or you can look at mine, we'll put it in the show notes if you want to see it.

If you had a peek at my winter inspiration photos, guess what you would see? Snow, snow and more snow, evergreen trees, starry night skies, and leafless trees frosted with ice. You would see both darkness and light.

Maybe you can relate to this description of winter, or maybe winter looks different to you based on where you grew up or the climate where you live. Whatever winter represents to you is what matters, which is why, once again, I'm going to boss you into pulling together a little collection of photos, all of which should be images of the current season in nature. This is the starting point for how you decorate for the season. Your objective is to train your attention on creating this so you can pattern the winter decor in your home on God's winter decor in the natural world. If you live in the southern hemisphere, you are gearing up for summer and you'll do the same thing only the opposite, so you're going to summerize before you add in Christmas decor. Last year, I watched the Donna Hay Christmas Special on Disney+, she's an Australian food stylist and author, and a great hostess. And it was fascinating to see her take cues from the outdoors – she did a lot of cooking outside, she's in a region and climate opposite of mine. But she did the

same thing, and used the five senses in her personal climate and surroundings, and welcomed Christmas in the summer climate. This method works no matter where you live.

You'll be able to welcome winter in the same way you experience winter in your everyday life, through your five senses.

Ok, it's time! We are going to work through the five senses, I hope this becomes a favorite part of prepping your home for every season. What you are going to do is consider how you experience winter in nature through your five senses so you can bring that into your home through seasonal supplies. Let's get started.

SCENT

I like to always begin with the sense of scent to seasonalize. I think that's been said to be one of the senses that triggers memories. So it's very powerful. So think about what scents remind you of winters and Christmases past? What scent will your children think of when they think of winter? Maybe it's through essential oils, scented candles, seasonal soaps, maybe you have fresh pine around your house, cinnamon, hot cocoa, soup, bread, citrus, and the smell of a fireplace or wood-burning stove can transport us to the heart of a wintery experience.

One of the ways we can take advantage of the power of scent is to create a scent rhythm throughout the year. Simply by using the same scent in your home each season year after year, you're creating a signature scent that will remind your family of what it smells like to be home at winter. Every winter, I usually end up burning a vanilla candle. It's super basic, but it smells like home. And on evenings when we are all home, I know we are all smelling that delicious vanilla and now, even though my boys are starting to move out, if I wanted to send a bit of wintery home with them, all I have to do is buy them that vanilla candle. And every time they light it, they'll have warm cozy memories of home. It does have a lot of power. So, I'll be sure to have those famous familiar scents, those signature scents of our family going when my youngest gets home from college or when we host any winter events this season. And you can do the same.

TOUCH

Next, the sense of touch. In winter, of course I rely on many of the same elements that create fall coziness, the textures, but I try to take them up a notch. I make sure we still have cozy throws on beds and the sofa and switch out any fall-colored pillows for maybe a neutral textured pillow or throw. I also love to incorporate a faux fur rug or maybe, I just got a new sheepskin that adds a lot of texture on the floor or on the back of a chair. This year our dog bed is a sheepskin that I just found, it's right in front of the fireplace. It adds beautiful visual texture, but also coziness because I put my feet on it every morning when I'm sitting in my chair reading and drinking coffee.

Of course you want to make sure everyone in your house has warm pj's, house slippers, and a thick soft blanket on their bed. I used to ask my teenage boys, "Do you need house slippers?"

And what kind?" But I realized that if I asked, they would just say, "I don't need that." You know, they said they wouldn't wear them. But then, I ended up just buying them each a pair of house slippers and sitting them next to their bed, I know what size they wear. And every year on the first really cold morning, they would all have them on. So, I just stopped asking.

More than any other season, winter is the time at our house when we make sure every room is warm and cozy beyond just checking the thermostat. Think about what coziness means to you and your family and make it a priority to sprinkle some cozy in your home this winter.

SOUND

Alright, next we are going to move onto the sound of winter. And, of course, when I think about how I experience winter through what I hear, one thing I think of is a crackling fire. Bonus: if you have a fireplace and use it, you might be hitting more than just the sense of sight but also touch, sound, smell – all kinds of senses happening there. If you don't have a fireplace, have you heard of the WoodWick candles? They have a natural wooden wick that sounds just like a crackling fire while it burns. So if a crackling fire is something that sounds wintery to you but you don't have a fireplace, you can try one of those WoodWick style candles. They are so cozy sounding.

What else sounds like winter? Well, to me – trains. I don't know why a train whistle sounds like winter. So, not the train that circles the christmas tree, but an actual train on tracks. I guess we've always lived close to train tracks for some reason, and in the summer when it's warm and humid out and all the leaves are on the trees, you just don't notice the train whistle. But then in the winter, the leaves fall and it's crispy outside and there's not very much humidity, somehow we start hearing the trains again. So I always associate a train whistle with winter.

So ask yourself, what sounds like winter to you? If you have a piano, maybe keep it open so that someone can play a Christmas song if they sit down.

You probably already know that every season, I encourage you to make a playlist. The only difference for winter is that you probably are going to want two playlists. Most of us might have a Christmas playlist, which is wonderful. I want you to have that. But have you considered making a winter playlist that does not have Christmas songs? Because winter is more than just Christmas. Think about having a playlist that, come January 15th, you would still want to listen to that still feels wintery to you. Of course, I have a winter playlist, I'll put it in the show notes, you can listen to that, you can add off of that, or you can say you hate it and make your own. But the point is just to surround yourself, again, that other layer of winter sounds.

TASTE

Ok, next is the taste of winter. So you can welcome winter through taste. If you've never prepped seasonally for home through taste, well, your family is really going to thank you.

I know every summer, we're grilling out or I'm making salads because we try to cook a little bit seasonally, but I start to look forward to cooking and eating those wintery, comfort food meals.

And they're called that for a reason, and winter is the perfect time to major on providing warm, rustic comforting foods. If you are cooking for a family, ask them what winter foods everyone is looking forward to. When I asked my boys, I was always shocked, like they would say simple things. I remember one year they said, "Oh, we would like green enchilada casserole." I think its from the very first Magnolia cookbook and it's one of our family's favorites and its easy. I always think it has to be really difficult to count, but it doesn't. It just has to feel like winter.

Once or twice a winter I decide to go all out and make homemade bread. In my house, a loaf of warm homemade bread is pretty rare. For years, when I do make bread, I've followed the steps from the Artisan Bread in Five Minutes a Day book. The process and the results are a winter blessing. It slows me down and the result tastes delicious. When you make a batch, it makes three or four loaves, so it pays off. I'm not a baker at heart, but even for this impatient imperfectionist, the bread has always been worth the trouble and just feels like winter to us.

Even small things, like having individual cocoa packets and a can of whipped cream on hand, or making sure you have a tube of store bought, "slash and burn" refrigerator cookie doughs, it's just simple supplies that delight kids of every age. So think about what foods feel like winter in your home. And do you have what you need to eat and serve wintery meals?

SIGHT

Lastly, I do consider adding a layer of visual, or sight, the sense of sight. Because, remember, we're thinking about winter and we're working through the five senses. I'm not talking about Christmas decor. I'm talking about what can you bring into your home that kind of gives a nod to the winter season. And again, if possible, I kind of like to do this first before I add in my Christmas decor and you'll see why at the end of this episode, and even at the end of next week's episode it will make more sense.

So, there are three main ways that I like to add the look of winter into my home. Of course, they all stem from what I see in nature.

The first is sparkle. When I think about my visual experience of the winter season, the first thing that comes to mind is light and darkness. The daylight is clearer and bright and crisp in winter, and a pure, intense darkness arrives in the late afternoon and lingers into the next morning. Even though I am all about a bright sunlight girl – I'm a summer girl, I love the summer – but winter reminds me that night was created as well, and has just as much as a purpose. I don't want to ignore that, I want to learn to embrace more of the darkness, even my home, and trust there's intention behind early nightfall and enjoy the stars and all of those things.

I try not to fight creation, which means, like I mentioned earlier, allowing our homes to be darker in the evenings. I'm not going to insist that all the overhead lights be on, and I allow for some darker evenings at home. But I make it a huge priority to incorporate candlelight or sparkle or twinkle light just to provide the coziness, touch of delight and wonder that I think we all long for during the winter season. I make sure I have candles – candles that I'll actually light, not just dusty candles for decor. Guys, don't do that, we want to light our candles. Or get battery

powered candles, something that just adds a layer of twinkle ambiance. I'll usually buy a few packs of tea light candles at the beginning of every winter season, and I just shop the house and gather up all my mercury glass, or votive holders and bring them together to make one big sparkly statement. Ok, so sparkle is the number one way I add in a visual winter feel.

Next is greens.

Where I live, winter also provides an abundance of evergreen branches, we have lots of magnolia leaves, and then just pieces of wood, I think, can look pretty wintery. So, I will start thinking about this even before, like right now I have some magnolia leaves cut in my house. I don't have any evergreen yet, but there aren't even Christmas trees in the Christmas tree lots yet. I still have pumpkins in my house, but at the same time I'm recording this it's a week before Thanksgiving, you're listening to this probably the week of or a couple of days after Thanksgiving, and so I kind of, just like creation, I add layer upon layer. Creation doesn't drop all of its leaves in one day and then the very next day it snows. No. It's a slow process, and we're allowed to do the same thing in my home. So I might have some pumpkins lingering in with some twinkling light, lingering in with some magnolia leaves, and it's just like this slow transition that feels more natural to me. And I actually really enjoy it.

So, in the winter, a lot of times I'll just cut something green from the yard. In my old house, we lived just a little bit more south of where we are now and we had some plants that felt a tiny bit tropical. Nothing like when we lived in Florida. But, I liked incorporating that into my greenery into what I had on my mantel. I would do a garland and then I would stick some tropical plants from the yard. Some of them were kind of spiky and just all kinds of different things that just felt like my backyard. They felt like my climate, and they felt right bringing that into my home.

No matter where you live, or what's green outside, you bring that in, and then at Christmastime, you'll layer it in with your Christmas decor. But a lot of times, this greenery stuff, I can bring that in in November. I'll break a few magnolia branches off, put that in water in a big beautiful jug or vase, and then every couple of weeks I'll break a few more branches off. And I can do that all the way until the leaves start blooming in April. So it kind of gets me through the winter. Ok, next the third thing I bring in the winter for visual decor is just some simple neutral texture.

You don't need to change your style for winter or choose a whole new color story for your home. Unlike fall, where there's so many colors happening, I think winter, for a lot of us, is just kind of drab, and kind of quiet, and kind of neutral. And that's ok.

Some examples of texture that I like to incorporate are faux furs, blankets, neutral table runners, maybe decorative tassels, chunky throws, maybe winter white pillow covers, baskets and wood bowls full of pinecones. Anything neutral, natural, and textural is up for grabs.

So shop your house and yard looking for sparkle and light, greens and neutral textures.

Lastly, just a reminder, to make sure you have some winter supplies. You probably already know this about me, but I kind of shy away from holiday-themed items of almost any kind because I'd rather invest in things that I can use all the time. So, I don't really use a Christmas blanket or a Christmas basket, or a Christmas vase, or serving pieces. Instead, I want really neutral pieces because I want to use them Fourth of July, for the wedding shower, for Christmas – whatever it is. And then I rely on my seasonal decor, my greenery, whatever is happening with that, maybe holiday decor to nod to what is happening beyond my neutral serviceware. So, when it comes to stocking up on winter supplies, a few things that I look for are:

- Candles, sparkly candlesticks, and candleholders
- Music and speakers to play your winter and Christmas playlists
- Cozy blankets in colors that work with my house, pj's and slippers without christmas trees on them because I want to keep using them and not feel weird about it
- Neutral, textured pillows and throws, I like to use a pillow cover that I can zip off and wash and then pack away
- Evergreen branches mixed with local greens, make sure you have vases of different shapes and sizes
- And then if you have a real fireplace, it's just helpful to get your fireplace ready, even if its not really cold yet. To me, that's part of having a winterized home. Know that I am going to enjoy a fire this year, so do I have firewood? Do I have a ring thing next to my fireplace? Do I have tools? All the things I need to do the things I want this season.

You could probably shop your house and yard right now and come up with most of the items on this list. Once you bring in a few greens, layer out the cozy throws and textured pillows, maybe you toss in a few sparkly, wintery candles, some music, bake some cookies – wouldn't your home feel wintery and festive? And you haven't even cracked open one of your Christmas bins yet. Do you see where I'm going? Doesn't that make sense?

Before I pull out Christmas stuff, I start to slowly winterize. I don't have to remake the house from top to bottom with all-new, Christmas-approved accessories. I just winterize by catering to the five senses. And it kind of helps take the pressure off all that needs to happen with my Christmas decor.

Once my home is winterized, there are really only three steps I do to add in Christmas decor. So that's what we're talking about next week. And I hope you'll join me, for kind of what is turning out to be a part two.

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Much of this content can be found in my last book *Welcome Home: A Cozy Minimalist Guide to Decorating and Hosting All Year Round*. You can find it at your local library or anywhere books are sold.

Do you know what to focus on and what not to worry about when it comes to decorating? It starts with knowing what Decorating Era you're currently in, see the show notes to take the quiz.

Lastly, every year I create a big gift guide for all sorts of people and types of things and this year is no different. Although I am a HUGE second hand shopper, I love to support my local small businesses, and I trust that you do as well. When it comes to the gift guide, I make sure it's 100% on Amazon, we'll put the link in the show notes for you there as well.