

HOUSE RULES

t h e p o d c a s t

Episode 13: How to Decorate for Christmas Like a Cozy Minimalist

I'm Myquillyn Smith and this is House Rules
Welcome to Episode 13

Imagine it's early December. It's 5 o'clock, which depending on where you live probably means it's dark or getting there. You pull your car into the driveway and look over to your house and it looks like a hallmark card. Not because it's perfect but because it's inviting. There's warm light coming through the windows and coziness inside waiting for you. You walk in and can still smell the scent of the vanilla candle that you burned last night. There's bread dough rising or maybe you bought a fresh loaf of bread to go along with a hearty soup. You turn on your winter playlist, slip off your work shoes and into your house slippers, maybe you turn a few lamps and get ready for your cozy night in your warm, comfortable home.

You'll be pulling out the Christmas bins in the morning, but because you listened to last week's Episode 12, you've already winterized your home so it requires so much less holiday decor to feel cozy and festive – you're actually looking forward to pulling out a few favorite things to decorate for Christmas.

By the end of today's episode, you'll learn my personal motto when it comes to the focus of my Christmas decor. I hope it encourages you.

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About fifteen years ago—just one year after the falling mantel garland disaster I shared last week, we lived in a different rental house, and this one had a big staircase that had a few turns in it. This meant that I had a lot of handrails turning corners going up the stairs. And I was excited because years prior I had found a bunch of vintage christmas greenery at a yard sale, I'm talking trash bags full of greenery, and I had been moving them from house to house, saving

them in case I ever needed it someday and I finally had a place to use it. I started out early one morning shortly after Thanksgiving. My three boys were at school and I pulled down old greenery from the attic, and started winding them around the banister. It was messy, tedious work but I knew it would be worth it to get the Christmasy staircase of my dreams. A few hours later I had finally attached all the greenery and I stood at the bottom of the stairs in a pile of pretend, dusty evergreen needles. I looked up and I hated what I saw.

Y'all, it was the worst experience because I was tired. I was looking forward to a beautifully decorated foyer and it did not look at all like what I envisioned. Also I had saved this precious garland for YEARS, I think I purchased it second hand the very first year Chad and I were married. So, I'm embarrassed to say that I saved it for 10 years before I had a house big enough to use it all. I would use maybe one or two strands, but had bought so much and I had saved so much. We had moved literally 10 times, not an exaggeration, a true number, at that point and I had convinced myself that this pretend old garland had so much value. And now I finally used it and I didn't like the way it looked.

Even worse, I had no idea what to do to make it look better. What I did know was this year I was not willing to do what I had done the previous year, which was: ugh, that doesn't look good, so I tried to go to Hobby Lobby multiple times to see if I could possibly fix it by adding more stuff. So I decided right then and there, in that moment, that even though I had been saving that discount garland for years, this was my chance to use it and it wasn't working. So, I made myself a fresh iced coffee and immediately went to work taking down all the garland, packing it back up into the bins to sell it at the yard sale I was planning for after Christmas. The feeling of freedom was shocking and remarkable. I had the floors swept and the house looked like nothing had happened by the time my boys came home from school and by the time Chad came home from work.

But the truth is, something had happened. I learned so much about myself that day. I decided that just because I kept that garland for years and years and years and years and years, envisioning how glorious it would look in my big beautiful home, even though I found it for such a great price, moved it from house to house, caring for it, making room in the attic for it, I let myself decide in an instant that it wasn't worth it anymore and I wasn't willing to keep it in hopes I could recoup the effort, cost, space, and vision of what could be. I was a little bit confused but also had a sense of pride about my decision. My family didn't even know what had transpired while they were gone. But that day, I decided that I wanted a Christmas home that felt simple, fresh, alive and one that brought me and my family comfort and joy.

I still love and loved Christmas decor back then, but I just wasn't willing to pay the price of storing lots of bins, exhausting myself three weeks before Christmas every year, only to have to pack it all away for 11 months. That was my personal decision.

Looking back, that one decision changed so much about my life. It was the first time I really trusted myself to change my mind, I think I became a Cozy Minimalist that day. I was able to evaluate and create the type of Christmasy home that I wanted, not the kind that the craft store

made me think I needed. For me, I learned that I myself, now this is not about you, but I learned finally that I actually like real garland, and real greenery and real Christmas trees. I think part of it is that I like real things, I like the way they smell, the imperfect way they look, but I think I also like the fact that I can just throw it away at the end of Christmas. I don't have to pack it up and take care of it.

I have to keep relearning this. Even just last year we moved to our bigger house and we did purchase a real tree for our family room, but I decided to also get a pretend tree for another room in our house. I thought, I'm going to splurge and get a beautiful tree from Terrain, it has great ratings, it was a little bit pricey and it was beautiful. And I hated it. I don't know what's wrong with me, but for some reason, me and pretend trees do not get along, so I will be passing it along to my boys and my husband for their shop so they can have something decorative and lit there, and hopefully I will learn that I'm just not going to be happy with fake Christmas garland, and I don't have to question it. It ain't for me, dog. We'll see if I finally learn.

Now I know that I create the most festive, peaceful, welcoming Christmas home when I focus on just three things: Simplicity, comfort and joy. It also has helped me to separate the idea of decorating for winter and decorating for Christmas, I hope this mindset helps you too.

I'm writing this episode one week before Thanksgiving, and I still have pumpkins out. But that doesn't mean I haven't started to winterize my home yet. If you listened to episode 12 you already know about winterizing, and if you haven't listened yet, this episode will not make sense until you do, so make sure you listen to Episode 12 first.

So even though I haven't unpacked a single Christmas bin, our home feels like it knows the seasons are changing. I had our fireplace inspected and I'm currently sitting in front of a cozy fire. I put all our battery powered candle lights in the window on Halloween night – they'll stay until the time changes in March. I pulled out heavy throws and tossed them on the sofas. I also pulled out our sheepskin rugs. So it might not yet feel like Christmas, but it also doesn't feel like nothing. It feels like my house realizes it's 32 degrees outside when we wake up. But I'll use all of these items through Christmas and probably into March.

If you've winterized your home in a way that welcomes the season with your senses, then your home already feels somewhat Christmasy. Since your home is winterized, anyone who enters your home, including you, is already getting cozy winter vibes by what they see, touch, hear, smell and taste. That means two things: first you don't have to pile on loads of additional store-bought decor to make your home feel festive, and you don't have to deprive yourself of that meaningful beauty you crave that highlights the true meaning of Christmas. The key is to strike the right balance between the two so that decorating for Christmas doesn't become a burden. And, of course, every year is probably a little bit different.

If you are going through the motions this year and decorating the house feels burdensome or unbearable, this is your sign that you can stop. Maybe you need to make a change. Maybe you need to undecorate, or rest. Isn't that the best atmosphere we can create for our families? We

don't have to have a Christmas that has to be packed away in twenty red-and-green plastic containers and feels like hard work and long to-do lists and hurry. This year, it could be that deemphasizing the holiday decor will help you to reemphasize the true meaning of Christmas. If that's the case, give yourself the gift of rest by doing less.

Or if this is a year you cannot wait to usher in the "thrill of hope," and part of that to you looks like decking the halls, by all means do that! If your decorating energy is high this year, I hope you enjoy every minute of embellishing your home as a visual representation of how you feel about Christmas. There is freedom on both sides of the Christmas decorating spectrum, and both cozy abundance and minimal simplicity can help you celebrate Christmas in your home.

I think the best gift I can give you, and you can give yourself, is permission and blessing to do less this Christmas if that's what you need. And the weary world rejoiced. Left to my own devices, unchecked and without intention, I know that I can end up making Christmas more difficult for myself. My default mode is to think I need to do everything the same as I've always done, plus add in fun new ideas I want to try. I assume things need to be complicated and time consuming in order to be special, or in order to do Christmas "right." That's the let-it-be-hard mindset, and none of us have time for that this Christmas.

What if you choose to let it be simple and easy this year? You can choose simplicity, comfort and joy.

I know you can't control what your extended family does and those expectations, but you can control what happens in your home. What if you demanded less of yourself this year? One way is to begin by making some subtractions in your home before you make any holiday additions. And though you might already have your tree up and all of that, you can still just walk through your house, be mindful if there is anything that can be put away for the next few weeks. Maybe you create an empty surface on your coffee table, maybe you take a stack of magazines out or a few pillows, just removing a few things can help it feel simple.

This next idea has really changed my Christmas decorating energy. I begin by telling myself I'm only going to decorate three places for Christmas. And then I have to evaluate my time, energy and decor and see if I want to add more. Yes, you heard right, three places. So I challenge you by starting with three places in your home. Remember, you've already winterized and you can make those three decorating places as overboard or underboard as your energy level and personal style would like. Maybe you need all kid art and color. Maybe you crave all whites and neutrals. Or maybe you want red and green, whatever your heart desires. It's not about choosing your style, it's about focusing your effort and making just three places feel super Christmasy to you, and decide if you need more.

For me, one of those three places is the Christmas tree, so then you have just two places left to concentrate your efforts. A lot of times I want to do the fireplace, so I'll do some greenery, maybe some lights or candles and then I'll hang the stockings. So that's two places, oh my

gosh, I only have one place left. So then from there, it will be decorating the side board or maybe a wreath on the door or something like that.

What I do after I decorate the three places, and what I would challenge you to do, is take a break. Don't directly look at your bins and say, "But I have so much stuff left!" Instead, look at your house and say, "How does it feel?" Does it feel simple, comfortable, joyful? Does it feel like Christmas? Could you be done? And you get to be the boss of that. I don't have a way to help you decide, but I will say, more often than not, the reason I continue to decorate is not that my house doesn't feel Christmasy, it's because I have extra stuff and I feel like I have to use it.

So a lot of times, instead of being bossed by my stuff, I realized I want to be the boss of my stuff. And if my house feels Christmasy enough after winterizing and focusing on three places, then I'm allowed to keep everything in the bins and be done. And in the next episode I'm going to tell you what to do after Christmas and how to pack up your Christmas, but for now we aren't going to worry about what's left over in the bins.

Of course, the first year I did this I realized I wanted to add more stuff just because I had it, and it felt like it was tradition. But really I didn't need all the rest and I didn't even love how it looked. It was so freeing, and still beautiful, to focus my efforts on a really gorgeous Christmas tree, a pretty mantel and sometimes someone will gift us a wreath and I'll put it on the front or back door.

I'm going to tell you, the first year that I truly simplified our Christmas, like to the point of panicking a little bit about what I was giving away and not using, I of course took photos of my home and I was blogging regularly at that time. And Better Homes and Gardens took notice and saw some of the photos and wanted to do a Christmas photo shoot that year. That convinced me that what I knew might be true was actually true. Which was that I really could have a festive, Christmasy home while using less stuff. Although the point is not to be in a magazine, it was kind of reassuring to me that I did not need all that access, all that stuff, I had been saving to have a festive home that felt like Christmas to my family.

Since I'm not a card-carrying minimalist but I'm a Cozy Minimalist, I get to decide when I've hit my style and stuff threshold, and you do as well. At Christmas, I often still limit myself to three places, but I still like the places I focus on to feel really full, really gorgeous and still abundant. The minimal part of me keeps the decor simple and doable, and the cozy part of me keeps everything interesting and meaningful. You get to create your own limits and boundaries, but the point of this episode is for you to remember that you get to boss your stuff, not the other way around.

One last word about boundaries. I know we probably all have that certain something we want to make sure gets displayed, whether it's a Christmas village, or a certain nativity scene, whatever it is. Most of us have something that once it's out and displayed, it officially feels like Christmas. Of course, Cozy Minimalists are allowed to have collections too, we just understand that the difference between a collection and a hoard is boundaries. So instead of buying every single

house for the Christmas village forever, we set a boundary. And we know that we are allowed to fill up whatever the boundary is, maybe it's the top of the buffet or the top of the piano, and that tells us when we have enough Christmas houses. And if we want more than we let others go. That's the difference between a Cozy Minimalist and a stuff manager when it comes to our Christmas decor. If you love your Christmas village collection but it's getting out of hand, you can boss it by setting limits and allowing only what will fill the the boundary that you choose. When you pick the surface first, the boundaries are automatic and you can give the rest away and make it have a happy home for itself.

One of the simplest ways I get more style with less stuff is by using larger items, even at Christmas. I talk about bigs over smalls in depth in the Cozy Minimalist Home book and show examples of how I used to decorate my house with one million tiny things, and then I ended up with a house that felt cluttered and disjointed, but still like it was missing stuff.

I've learned the hard way that I can use the same money that I would have spent on twelve tiny items to buy one large statement item and get a much bigger return on my investment. Trading out lots of small items for a few big items brings presence and style to my home with less stuff. And that's the same whether it's Christmas decor, wintery stuff or just everyday decorating.

Instead of setting out the Christmas salt-and-pepper shakers, the gingerbread man candy dish, and the Christmas village of twenty-nine houses that now have to be spread around three or four rooms because they've outgrown their display surface, I try to focus on a couple of large statement pieces. Maybe a large wreath, or something over your fireplace, like a big beautiful garland that's fluffy. Whatever it is, consider how you're going to store it and if it can be one thing that makes a statement, instead lots of tiny little things.

Oh, and if you have a quirky statement piece in your home, that already is something that gets attention, I think one of the best ways to welcome the Christmas season is just to embellish what you already have that is already catching people's attention. Maybe you have a custom hood over your stove, maybe you have a big, beautiful carved mirror right by your front door. Those are the things that should be embellished, they're already decorative, they are already adding to the style of your home. Add a little bow, add a little candle, add a little rudolph nose. Just something little, nodding to the fact that that item that is already a signature piece, is adding presence in your home.

You do not have to create the most visually enchanting, magical, expensive, laborious Christmas house for your family, unless you truly want to. You're allowed to change your mind, you're allowed to start a new tradition, pass on decor, let your kids adopt a room to decorate or undecorate this year. You are not required to have bins of Christmas decor in order to have a meaningful Christmas in your home with your family.

When you choose to be intentional about something as basic as Christmas decor it truly can spread and create space to help you be more intentional about other things. At least that's how it worked for me. I hope this year you can find a few areas to remove some expectations, some

places to simplify, but also have a beautiful holiday with the people you love the most in the world.

When you choose to not force perfection and allow imperfection to work its magic, people will naturally respond by letting their guard down and connecting on a deeper level. You don't have to have the most festive home on the block in order to host meaningful holiday gatherings. You can create simple beauty without fretting, overbuying, or DIYing yourself into an exhausted mess before you open your home, or before you just relax in your home with your family. People won't remember how impressed they were by your house; they'll remember how impressed they were by your kindness, your attention, and your openness. This Christmas, I hope you welcome people into your home with love and simply, and celebrate the season together.

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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 simply with knowing your Decorating Era. We're all in one. If you want to take the quiz, just see the show notes and I will help you figure out exactly what era you are in right now.

Lastly, every year I create a big gift guide for Cozy Minimalists for all sorts of people and this year is no different. Although I am a HUGE second hand shopper and supporter of local small businesses, and I trust you are as well, when it comes to the gift guide, I keep it simple and it's 100% Amazon based. We'll put the link in the show notes for you.

I've got one more episode for this year coming after this, and it's going to be about packing away your Christmas decor, so before you do, be sure to listen, it will drop the Thursday after Christmas.