

# HOUSE RULES

t h e p o d c a s t

## **Episode 14: How to Take Back Your House: Undecorating Like a Cozy Minimalist**

I'm Myquillyn Smith and this is House Rules.  
Welcome to Episode 14.

Once the guests have gone, the used wrapping paper is in the recycle bin, the leftovers are eaten and Christmas is officially over, it's time to take down the Christmas decor. I used to dread this part. It's depressing right? But not anymore, now I actually look forward to packing up the Christmas decor and taking back my house.

By the end of today's quick episode you'll have a simple four step process to pack away your Christmas decor that will make next year's unpacking easier and more enjoyable than ever.

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For years, every day after Christmas my mom and my sister and I would show up early at Target and without fail, I always found myself buying more Christmas decor. It was deeply discounted and so beautiful! Look how smart I am! Then I would come home and begin taking down my Christmas tree. Plus, I now needed to store the brand new Christmas Decor that I had just purchased - I hadn't even pulled it out of the package yet. I was in this kind of little cycle of adding about one new christmas storage bin a year. And after a few years, I knew that I needed to declutter.

But it was early January, I was tired after Christmas and so tired of looking at Christmas decor. Who wants to declutter Christmas stuff then? But eleven months later, when I pulled out my Christmas bins, it was so exciting! That wasn't the time to declutter and evaluate and make decisions, I had forgotten about all of this stuff. This was the time for fun! Clearly, I was adding in stuff but I was never subtracting, and that led to me being more overwhelmed a little bit more every single year. There were years where I had more Christmas decor that I didn't use, than stuff that I actually did use. Plus my bins were multiplying, taking up more space year after year.

Finally I had enough. I wasn't exactly sure where to start but the first thing I did was just to start with the big picture and it actually worked out great.

**The first step to packing away your Christmas decor is to decide how much room in your house you are willing to dedicate to storing Christmas stuff.**

Remember, most of us only use this stuff for four weeks out of the year. When I really faced the truth of that logic, I realized my Christmas decor was taking up a disproportionate amount of room in our tiny basement, compared to how much we got to actually use and enjoy it. Which for us, was mainly just looking at it.

I decided I was willing to use one area of a big basement closet that we had for Christmas storage and that was it. So, I could fit about 3 or 4 bins and hang a few things on the wall if needed. That gave me room to actually walk around in the rest of the closet to get other seasonal things we used other times of the year.

What was sadly revealing was, at that time we also had a swimming pool, and we live in North Carolina, so we could use our pool from April through September—almost 6 months out of the year. But I was letting Christmas decor take over our storage area and I didn't even have room to adequately store our pool floats and the stuff we actually used and played with. This was stuff we had fun with and interacted with for, like, half our life - six months out of the year. Here's a little holiday math for you: if you wait until Thanksgiving to pull out your Christmas decorations like I do, and then if you put your Christmas decor back up right after Christmas – that's about 8.5% of the year we are using, enjoying and looking at our Christmas decor. That equals to 8.5% of our life. It's not really that much time for something that can feel overwhelming and daunting. At least it was to me. If you keep your decorations out longer, maybe you take them out at Halloween and leave them up until New Years, you are at about 15 or 16% of the year and your life when you're using your decor. And so, I just think that's helpful to remind ourselves how much of our life are we letting it take up in storage versus how much of our life we are actually enjoying it.

For me, the Christmas decor that we only looked at for one month of the year, less than 10% of our life, was the boss of my storage area, it was like the big, mean mafia. And that didn't make sense.

So, first I decided on limits: How much physical space and even the number of containers that I was willing to dedicate to storing stuff that I can enjoy for just three to six weeks out of the year.

Listen, your limit can be whatever you want. It could be a few shelves in the closet, it can be a corner in the attic, it can be the entire garage, or just a couple of bins. The point is, to pre-decide how much you are willing to store. And just be honest with yourself.

**Step two in packing away your Christmas decor is to get your storage containers or bins out right now, or when it's time to pack up and evaluate.**

If you are like me, when you open the storage bins in January after Christmas, there's still stuff in there. What?!?!

This is all the decor you didn't use this year because maybe you moved and now your house is smaller and you don't need it. Or maybe it's the stuff you don't really like but it was a gift, or it's tradition and so you store it forever to avoid the guilt of getting rid of it. That makes sense, right? Or maybe you just wanted a simpler Christmas this year and you needed to see how it felt not to use every item in your bin. Whatever the reason, if you didn't use that decor this year, that means it's been stored away in your home for twelve months at the minimum, If you avoid getting rid of it now and wait until next year to decide whether to keep it, you are storing and lugging out something for years that you don't even know if you'll need. Is that really worth it? Would you pay money to store this stuff? Because you actually are. You are paying monthly, rent or mortgage on your home and every square foot counts. If you store your stuff inside you're even heating and cooling this stuff. So it does have an actual, literal cost.

The thing is, as women, we are even more sensitive to stuff in storage and excess stuff than men: it's called clutter anxiety and basically, there are fancy studies on the fact that we women kind of have magical powers where we FEEL the amount of excess we keep and it takes a quiet toll in the background of our lives, kind of adding a layer of stress and anxiety. No thanks.

Evaluating what you no longer need can be an extra hard step if maybe you're in a Soulful Styling era, remember we talked about different styling eras a few weeks ago. But remember, your home is there to serve you, not the other way around. If you don't yet know what decorating era you're in, be sure to take the quiz, we'll put the link in the show notes.

My advice is to keep only the Christmas decor you used this year and to give the rest away. When it comes time to pull out those red-and-green bins next year, I don't want you to feel depressed because you have to dig through stuff you don't love. Stuff that has now been literally stored in your home without you using it for at least a year, maybe two. Instead, I hope you open up those bins with joy, enthusiasm, and excitement. Give yourself that gift by deciding now - not next November - what to keep and what to get rid of.

This is one reason that I like to focus on consumables and winter decor. If you listened a few episodes ago, you know what that is. That way I don't have to store as much stuff and I can have fun reinventing how my house looks each year because I don't have a zillion bins of plastic decor. I can use different color ribbon or pillow covers or just burn, you know if I want red candles or green candles or blue candles - whatever it is, and I use them up and enjoy them.

**Alright, tip number 3: I don't use those special ornament boxes, like the original boxes that the ornaments came in or those plastic ornament shaped boxes to pack my ornaments away. What I use is nice quality gift boxes. I'm not talking about those flimsy fold**

up shirt boxes. I'm talking about the nice gift boxes that you have to buy, you see on TV shows, you know, where the family isn't tearing open wrapping paper but they just untie a bow and then lift the cover off a sturdy box. And the box is pretty on the outside. You can't fold these up when you're done and they cost more than a shirt box, but here's the secret to how to use them.

Let's say you buy a few fancy gift boxes after Christmas, on a discount. You're going to get your sturdy gift boxes out – after Christmas we put ours underneath the Christmas tree. So, it still looks like there's gifts under there. We even keep any old tissue paper in them if we've wrapped a gift and have tissue paper around it. So, then when it's time to pack up the Christmas decor, you get out your nice gift boxes. They're just right there under the tree, and you open them up, and that's what you use to pack away your breakables, your ornaments, your stockings, whatever it is. You can use the tissue paper again.

So these boxes are going to stack really nicely in your bins or storage boxes and they protect any breakables because they are sturdy, plus, you'll use that leftover tissue paper to wrap them up in. Now your gift boxes are storing your ornaments for 11 months, then next November when you open up your bins, you are going to hang up your ornaments and stuff and then you're going to have empty gift boxes, and they are ready for their second job of holding gifts during Christmas. Then, if you want, you can wrap the gift boxes, or, if you're like our family, most of the time we do what they do on TV and we use a really nice ribbon and we tie a bow around the pretty gift box that we all like looking at, and it looks Christmasy. That way minimal wrapping is required.

About 6 or 7 years ago, I bought some really nice sugar paper, neutral but Christmasy boxes from Target and I've used them every year just like this. The trick is to only use your nice Christmasy gift boxes for your immediate family, you don't want them to leave the house. I don't let my boys use my \$6 gift boxes for their girlfriends or anything, because I want to use them again to store our Christmas decor, and then of course I use them again next year to wrap our gifts in. It's a really great excuse to buy some nice sturdy gift boxes after Christmas and it also makes your wrapping life easier next year.

**Alright, the fourth tip is to write a quick note to yourself and tuck it into one of your bins with anything you want to remember for next year.**

Some of my past notes to myself have said things like:

- Buy at least a 26 pound turkey if you want leftovers.
- Bake the gingerbread the day before you want to decorate it.
- Gavin will say he wants nothing for Christmas: he does want things.
- If I have less than 12 replacement bulbs, be sure to order more and pack them away.
- Don't buy the fattest Christmas tree even though you want it. Every year I want a really fat Christmas tree, and last year, y'all, I got one and it overpowered our house. It was such a disaster and so in the way. And even this year, we were at the Christmas tree farm and I was so sad because there wasn't a fat one. And I'll tell you, it was such a

relief to have a skinnier Christmas tree. We could move around, we could turn on the light, we could sit in front of the fireplace. It changed my life. So, I am writing that down this year, to not be tempted with a really fat Christmas tree, even though I love them so much. I love a fluffy tree.

So, these reminders are immensely helpful come next year, when I've forgotten all of this stuff and you've forgotten it as well. You don't need fancy stationery or to type it up, just a quick piece of copy paper, and at the top I'll write "Notes from 2023". So, I've been doing this every year and I just keep the previous year's one because I think it's fun to look back on. So I just keep them all at the top of one of my Christmas bins, and when I open it next year, there it is, and it's a fun reminder and helpful to read through.

**So to recap, the four steps to simplify your Christmas decor:**

1. Set limits now: decide how much space, or the area, what containers you are willing to dedicate to storing Christmas decor.
2. Each year evaluate what to keep *when* you pack it away, this is when you are the most in touch with what you like, not next year when you pull it back out.
3. Consider using nice gift boxes for storage, then again for gifts. And then the cycle continues.
4. Write a quick note to your future self with what did and didn't work this year and pack it away with your decor.

Wouldn't it be nice to look forward to cozying up your home for Christmas without dreading unpacking the decor and then hauling it all back into storage? Wouldn't it be great to open up those bins and love every single thing you see instead of worrying about how to use what you're tired of? Too often, we get stuck in a forever routine of thinking we have to use everything we always have because that's the way we've always done it. We kind of end up becoming rigid stuff managers, all in the name of creating a holiday home. Who wants to be overwhelmed at Christmas? Not me, and not you.

I actually don't want to be an overwhelmed stuff manager at all during my life, no matter the season.

You know, there are times in my life that I felt like I was buying stuff, organizing stuff, washing stuff, moving stuff, dusting stuff, losing stuff, complaining about my stuff, looking at more stuff I want to buy all while being surrounded by overstuffed drawers, closets and shelves.

I longed for a beautiful simple home and I assumed I must have all the wrong stuff. The only way to get there must be to buy more stuff!

I never considered that if everything that sits out in my home has a voice, when all I do is add more stuff to my home, those visual voices, if you will, are getting louder and louder and they are screaming at me. How can I quiet the voices? Well, I figured it out.

I hush the house.

House Hushing is a method I came up with years ago when I was trying to declutter without first making a bunch of uninformed decisions. Decision fatigue is real. Especially this time of year. What if you could first enjoy the benefit of a quieted, decluttered house without having to hold each item, or thanking it and asking it if you should keep it? House Hushing is backwards decluttering because you don't have to start with making a bunch of exhausting decisions. But you still get the reward of a quieted space AND your leader, me: is someone who still values a beautiful home. So you can still have pretty stuff, it's not about just not having anything. House Hushing is the first step to creating a simple home. This is not about rigid minimalism, this is about Cozy Minimalism: getting the most amount of style – your style – with the least amount of stuff.

If you're ready to quiet the voices of all the stuff in your home in the most gentle and simple way possible, you're going to want to join me for the House Hushing Challenge. I'm hosting this challenge in my private FaceBook group: the Cozy Minimalist Community. For just \$10 you can start the year with a quieter, simple home. The link is in the show notes, and we hope to see you there.