



Santa's *Other* Little Helpers

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You could forgive David Mills for feeling a little like Scrooge when he decorates his Old Louisville apartment this Christmas. After all, by that point he will have decorated dozens, if not hundreds, of houses all around Kentuckiana—sometimes as many three a day. For Mills, a decorator with Jenkins-Eliason Interiors, the holiday season starts as early as the middle of November and doesn't end until he and his crew take down all those decorations in early January.

Amazingly, Mills loves nearly every minute of the season. "It's something I truly enjoy," he said. "I'm a self-proclaimed Christmas guru."

Part of his enjoyment carries over from his design background and a lifelong fascination with space, with the design process, with how people move through and use their homes. But most of his enjoyment, as with most people, is tied to the emotional connections the holiday evokes. "It's about past memories, sentimental things that mean a lot," he said.

Of course, memories are funny things. People who cherish childhood memories of setting up a Christmas tree and lovingly hanging ornaments tend to forget the hassle involved in hauling boxes out of the attic and untangling Gordian knots of Christmas lights, not to mention reversing the whole process a few weeks later.

Many of those who remember the hassle call on decorators like Mills. Some just want a single tree set up and decorated, but most want their whole houses done.

Mills remembered handling decorations for one of Jenkins-Eliason Interiors' clients, who has a 24,000-square-foot home complete with grand staircase. He and his crew arrived at the house one day with a vanload of greenery, ornaments, and wrapped boxes, expecting that those decorations would be sufficient. They weren't.

“All of that went into the grand staircase,” Mills said with a rueful smile. “We kept adding and adding and adding. Three vanloads later....” His voice trailed off as he thought about the huge amount of decorations involved. The house took two days to decorate.

More than just getting the job done, though, clients want the job done right—with the kind of flair only a decorator can provide. “Some want a lot of input or have ornaments they’ve used for years, but others give us free rein,” he said.

Two schools of thought dominate holiday design today, according to Mills. One, which he called heavy traditional, creates a full, lush boutique look with lots of ornaments and decorations, reflecting the fact that Christmas is usually a time of intense celebration. The other is very naturalistic, focusing on fresh greens, trees covered in nothing but white lights, or wreaths decorated with nothing but pinecones. “This look is a little more modern but also more natural,” he said.

Which style a homeowner chooses depends on personal taste, of course, but also on the surroundings. For example, the naturalistic look would be quite appropriate in a wood-paneled library, but a Christmas tree in a formal marbled entryway would look better covered with red silk ribbons and hand-painted glass ornaments.

Of course, many homeowners can make decisions like that with a little careful thought. But there’s something they can’t do, Mills said: “One thing we do is come back and take it all down.”

And that more than anything can make for a very merry Christmas and a happy new year.

A ho-ho-ho how-to (sidebar)

David Mills offered these quick tips for do-it-yourself holiday decorators:

1. **Better than reality.** To create a naturalistic look, you don’t have to stick exclusively with fresh greens. Instead, start with an artificial garland or wreath and stuff it full of holly, magnolia and fresh evergreens. “It gives you a super lush look and all the aromas of Christmas,” Mills said.
2. **Light up your life.** “You can’t have too many candles,” Mills said. Scented candles, tea lights and beeswax candles give your home a sense of warmth and holiday style.
3. **Go for the gold.** Do you have an old artificial wreath or tabletop tree sitting around? Spray paint it gold and wrap it with a purple silk ribbon for an elegant look.
4. **Make a clean sweep.** Before you drag the first box down from the attic, put away your fall items and make room for your Christmas decorations. “For [the room] not to look jumbled, it’s better to take away some of the smaller items especially,” Mills explained.

5. **Break the rules.** Mills said that every home is different and that personalization is a big part of what he does. Whether you like Santa Clauses or antique ornaments, incorporate your preferences into your design.