

SHORTCUTS

Safety First, Then Mistletoe, Is Byword for the Holidays



Ben Stolar for The New York Times

Craig Burton, of Fibrenew in Austin, Tex., says his business spikes around the holidays as clients prepare for guests.

By ALINA TUGEND
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LAST Thanksgiving, I learned a valuable safety tip: be careful when using a foil roasting pan. It can puncture and fat can drip in the oven, resulting in a fire.

All this caused quite some excitement because 22 people were waiting to be fed. We managed to save the turkey, though, and the oven suffered no long-term harm. But the incident reminded me that when we prepare meals and our homes for the holidays, most of us tend to concentrate on how nice everything will look and taste. We don't really think about keeping our guests safe.

[Cynthia Weber](#), a decorator in Ontario, remembers a similar situation.

She was at her aunt's house for Christmas. "Boughs of pine were elegantly draped over the crystal chandelier above a stunning centerpiece of candles." Everyone was seated at a formal dinner, complete with Waterford crystal and Limoges plates. Then, a candle lighted the pine on fire. Alarms went off and the security system started calling.

"We couldn't swat at it because it was in midair attached to a crystal chandelier," Ms. Weber said.

Her aunt, thinking quickly, went to get wet tea towels and smothered the flames.

"But everybody felt a little singed," Ms. Weber said.

As the holidays approach, people start poring over decorating magazines and online sites and "get completely fixated on everything looking beautiful even if it's completely impractical," she said.

Most of us think first of beauty, then comfort, then safety, said David Mauldin, owner of the home repair company House Medic, based in Austin, Tex.

"That order should be reversed," he said.

It may not be a Hallmark saying, but I strongly believe that a good holiday is one where you avoid the emergency room.

Start with the first impression your house will make. Is there adequate lighting, even in rain and fog? Is there a loose step?

As for beauty, take a hard look at your front door. Last year, my colleague Bob Tedeschi wrote a great article on [how to spruce up your front door](#) for the holidays, taking on everything from picking out a new doormat to installing new door handles and locks.

If you don't want to do it yourself, Mr. Mauldin said his company, which is a franchise of [HouseDoctors.com](#), can make a front door look almost like new in a few hours.

Although garlands draped over banisters can be festive, don't forget that handrails serve an important practical function, Ms. Weber said.

"People are sometimes afraid to touch the banisters if they're decorated," she said. Securing a decoration to the outside of the rails allows people to still use them.

When your guests enter your house, make sure they're not assaulted with an overload of smells. Hold back on the scented candles, Ms. Weber said, because the combination of food and perfume can become overwhelming.

We often entertain more people than usual at holidays and drag out card tables or folding chairs that we use only annually. Check to be sure that they're in good operating order. At another Thanksgiving my family attended years ago, the beautifully laid table collapsed just as the turkey was placed on it.

And while dishes of colorful candies can be attractive, they can also be a choking hazard for toddlers, Ms. Weber said. Place them high enough so that children can reach them only with an adult's help.

The bathroom may not be the first place you think of when entertaining, but it is a room a lot of guests will visit while in your house. Always make sure there's a fairly full roll of toilet paper and if necessary, an extra one in easy sight. Finding the host to inquire about more toilet paper is never enjoyable.

Speaking of places to escape to, it's not a bad idea, if possible, to set up a "quiet room" with no music or decorations for someone who needs to nurse a baby or recover from a headache, Ms. Weber said.

If you're having houseguests stay over a night or more, the bathroom becomes even more important. Wet hair, steam and an unfamiliar shower can be a recipe for disaster.

"Most accidents happen when people are stepping from one wet surface to another," Mr. Mauldin said. So make sure there's a nonslip mat outside your shower.

Sometimes people want to go the extra distance to ensure their older guests' safety in the bath and buy grab bars that stick to the walls with suction.

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Don't, Mr. Mauldin said. They're too often installed incorrectly, and even if not, they have a tendency to pull away from the wall, creating more danger than if there were no grab bar at all.

And remember to pay attention to those unsung workhorses of a holiday — appliances.

With weather changing rapidly in some areas, people may not think of checking that their heater is in good working order. But if the temperature happens to drop the day of your Christmas dinner, you don't want your guests bundled up in parkas indoors because the heater isn't working.

One important tip from Angie Hicks, founder of the referral site Angie's List: don't use the self-cleaner on your oven the night before the big event, as the high heat can cause the oven's electronic components to fail.

Also, it's a good idea to make sure the oven cooks at a true temperature. "If it's too hot or cold by a few degrees," Ms. Hicks said, "it can throw the whole meal off."

To test the oven, she suggests buying a cake mix and baking it to the exact recipe. If it's overdone or underdone, you'll know your temperature is off. You can either get the oven repaired or adjust your cooking times accordingly.

And don't stuff your freezer or refrigerator, Ms. Hicks said. Air must circulate to keep things cold, and if the refrigerator is too full, the food may not be cold enough.

Of course, while being safety-conscious, we also want our rooms to look good. Unfortunately, I often don't notice (or bother to fix) the inevitable flaws — the chipped baseboard, the broken door knob — until I see them through my mother's eyes.

"Or even worse, your mother-in-law's," Mr. Mauldin said.

And if you want your furniture to look better, a [company called Fibrenew](#) promises it can fix the couch your cat got its claws into or the spot where the bleach or the nail polish remover spilled.

The company, which has franchises in the United States and several other countries, specializes in leather and vinyl repair, beginning at around \$120, said Daniel Danforth, the company's vice president for education.

Unfortunately, not much can be done for the fabric chairs that my cats have torn to shreds, other than throwing on some slipcovers.

If you want to try to do the repairs yourself, here are a couple of don'ts: Don't use marker to hide spots on leather or vinyl. Don't use olive oil or any kind of petroleum to keep leather from drying. It will end up damaging the leather. Instead, buy cleaner and protective cream from a quality furniture store. The [blog](#) on Fibrenew's site has additional tips.

And here's my final bit of advice — have a good neighbor. When my oven caught fire last Thanksgiving, our neighbor, who was going out to a friend's, graciously allowed us to finish cooking in his oven. It saved us from feasting on pizza.

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