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Deck (and clean) those halls

By Elizabeth Harmon
If there's no place like *your* home for the holidays, it's time to get ready.

Think of these steps: organize and clean, decorate, then spruce again just before guests arrive.

Organize

If you're expecting overnight guests, remove clutter from the guestroom. "This room may have become your catch-all," says Clare Mantelman, owner of Organize Now in Barrington. To tackle the mess, she suggests large garbage bags, empty boxes, markers, sticky notes, storage bins, tape or label maker. Also, bring the phone and a glass of water, so you're not tempted to wander off before you're finished.



(Photo provided)

Sort items and ask questions, such as, "Do you really need it? Are you going to finish it? Are you going to fix it? Getting rid of things can feel better than having them sit around," Mantelman says. Box donations, bag trash, pack the keepers into storage bins and label.

Immediately remove trash and donated items from the house. Take labeled storage bins to the basement or attic.

If guests are sleeping in the living room or family room declutter this area as well as a nearby closet.

"That way guests can have a place to put their suitcase, bedding and other items," Mantelman says. Once you're organized, give your house a thorough cleaning or hire a service. For a finishing touch, add a room deodorizer with a subtle holiday scent.

Decorate

Instead of shopping, bring out special things you already have, even if they aren't traditional decorations. Jeff Rice, owner of Décor Designs in Crystal Lake, suggests starting with a holiday color palate and finding items to fit it. "Black, red, white and silver are the trends for this year," Rice says.

For a centerpiece, arrange ornaments with spray-painted and natural pinecones and boughs on a silver cake stand. Fill a clear glass vase with bells, apples or sturdy flower blossoms. That black tablecloth from Halloween creates a striking, unique look in the dining room.

Want a more traditional palate? Try chocolate brown, copper and lime green, suggests Marengo designer Tammi Sava of Garden Gate Floral Interiors. "The brown and copper are earth tones and the lime green gives it new life. They also work well with Christmas reds and greens," Sava says.

Add vintage ornaments and toys such as dolls, books and even colorful board games. "So many people have things packed away. But you can dress up just about anything and it becomes a decoration," Sava says.

Spiff

Before guests arrive, recruit help for a whirlwind tidy. Mantelman breaks it down to four steps: box, label with date, store, review. Assign each person a room, give them a box labeled and dated for that room. Go through the room and box items that don't belong. If there's time, return them to their proper place. If not, stash the box until guests leave, then go through it.

"Don't just jam things in drawers because you'll forget where you put them," she says.

Never got around to cleaning? Don't lose hope. These tricks can have you guest-ready fast.

- Kitchen: Remove excess items from countertops, refrigerator magnets, wipe down appliance exteriors with a damp rag. Spot clean large spills in fridge and floors. Load the dishwasher, wipe down the sink.
- Bath: Wipe sinks, faucets and mirrors. Wipe toilet seat, rim. Give the bowl a quick squirt of cleaner and swish with a brush. Set out fresh towels, hand soap.
- Living room, family or dining room: Box, label and store clutter from tabletops, dust coffee and end tables; fluff cushions.
- All (public) rooms: Vacuum or sweep floors; empty trashcans.

Above all remember, you don't need a perfect home for a perfect holiday. Relax, roll out the welcome mat and enjoy.

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