

No place like home for the holidays

Sherwood Park mom's yuletide spirit sparkles and glows in every room

BY DAWNA FREEMAN, SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL EDMONTON DECEMBER 17, 2011

Good friends will tease she has too much time on her hands, decorating every room in her house for Christmas by mid-November.

And Ann Marie Stefanishen's daughter Shealyn remembers counting 12 decorative trees in the house one year. But she didn't realize the extent of her mother's yuletide gusto until an entire room in the basement had to be dedicated to storing Christmas decorations.

Good-natured teasing aside, no one will deny this busy Sherwood Park mom has a magic touch when it comes to transforming her family's home into a luminous Christmas wonderland.

"I love Christmas and the spirit of Christmas - the giving and the joyfulness of families coming together and friends gathering," says Stefanishen, an account rep for a promotions company, "and I like to enjoy that special feeling for as long as I can."

Every year the Stefanishens host between 25 and 30 relatives Christmas Day, and Ann Marie approaches each new season with fresh ideas and infectious enthusiasm. "I've always been a creative person, and putting together Christmas for family and friends gives me great enjoyment."

Holiday decor, to go

Take, for example, the Christmas the family spent in the Dominican Republic. Shealyn, 28, says her mother toted along a Christmas tree and decorations for their hotel room, and a CD player so they could listen to their favourite Christmas tunes by the pool. The staff loved the music so much, her mother made the CDs a parting gift.

Growing up the tenth of 13 children in a little hamlet 43 kilometres from St. John's, N.L., Ann Marie says they couldn't afford to celebrate Christmas most years. When they did have a tree, she recalls, each child would find one gift beneath it.

But as adults, determined to create happy Christmas memories for their only child, Ann Marie and husband Larry brought home their first family Christmas tree when Shealyn was nine months old. "Just one tree," she stresses. "Our budget was tight."

This year, seven trees - three over four feet and four smaller - sparkle and glow throughout their twostorey home. Every room has been sprinkled with Christmas magic, from the angel in the main-floor powder room to dainty doorknob decorations.

Her upbringing only cultivated her creative flare: "You can't grow up with 12 siblings without learning how to use your own mind to make or create something from nothing."

A couple who love to entertain, their 23-year-old renovated home reflects their relaxed personality and comfortably elegant style.

A welcoming wreath in the foyer makes a festive statement the moment guests step through the door, and the mix of cosy neutral and sophisticated black in the living room is warmed by the glow from the candles and fire.

Purple dazzles in display

This season, Ann Marie chose to decorate around the colour purple, because that was the theme colour of her daughter's May wedding, and she wanted the living room tree to honour their first Christmas with the newlyweds.

She dressed the nine-foot Christmas tree in jewel-like purple oversized bulbs, sparkly gold ornaments, mini twinkle LED lights and glamorous four-inch-wide ribbons cascading down from the top.

She placed deep purple artificial flowers in the room's two vases and found throw pillows to pick up the softer purple hues. Bold and juicy purple ornaments also sparkle from the 24 metres of garland draped around the stairwell and railings.

Meanwhile, in the corner of the great room sits a more traditional 11-foot tree, accented with green and burgundy, while an eye-catching four-foot-diameter wreath adorns the dramatic stone fireplace. Borrowing elements from last year's wreath, Ann Marie decorated this one with pine cones, gold bulbs and bows, and faux elements of grapes, leaves and flowers.

Each year, Ann Marie changes up a room or area by mixing decorations from her basement "Christmas Room" with newer seasonal accessories and finds. She shops the after-Christmas sales for next year's knick-knacks, and visits every Christmas Store she can while travelling. If she sees something she likes in a home decor or gardening store, she takes a picture of it on her iPhone so she can try to replicate it when she gets home.

This year, her favourite dollar store find was thick metallic paper plate chargers (6 for \$1.25) with matching metallic gold napkins (24 for \$1). "It's perfect for large dinner parties."

Shealyn Gabel says her favourite Christmas memories are of that special day, every year, when her mom decides it's time to decorate and summons her and her father to help.

"Every year there are new decorations and this year, it's the purple tree, which is my favourite to date."

BUDGET-FRIENDLY DECORATING TIPS

- ? Narrow your focus: Decorate one or two rooms and make them your dream rooms.
- ? Select a colour scheme that goes with your decor. Choose two colours or mix different shades of the same colour.
- ? Decide on a focal point, such as a tree, mantel, fireplace or window.
- ? Use existing candle holders and replace everyday candles with more festive or Christmas candles.
- ? Replace artificial flowers in decorative vases with Christmas or themed coloured flowers.
- ? Buy a decorative bowl and add potpourri in the accent colours that match your room.
- ? Borrow ideas from around you. See something you like in a store display or magazine? Snap a quick photo with your

smartphone and make it yours.

? If you have an artificial tree, buy fresh evergreen boughs just before Christmas.

? Less is more, and just as stylish. Try fewer, oversized tree ornaments.

? Trail a four-inch-wide ribbon down the tree rather than around the tree.

? String a garland along the back-splash of the kitchen countertop.

? Use brighter, energy-efficient LED lights on your tree or garlands.

? Have something decorative in the rooms your guests will visit.

? Fill a glass bowl or tall vase with ornamental bulbs and weave through mini white lights for a soft glow.

? String last year's Christmas cards across the mantel or over a railing or cabinet to get an instant Christmas lift.

? Buy Christmas dinnerware and glasses on sale after Christmas.

? Accent existing room fixtures or elements with something Christmasy.

? Check out the knick-knacks at the dollar stores and after-Christmas sales at home decor and gardening stores.

? Use natural materials, such as pine cones, fruits and fresh greenery.

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