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Tips for successful office Secret Santa exchanges

The holiday season provides plenty of opportunities to socialize. Holiday celebrations are sometimes akin to family reunions, but friends also tend to celebrate together in December. Such celebrations sometimes include different groups of friends, and that may require hosts to do a little extra to break the ice so everyone relaxes and has a good time.

Secret Santa gift exchanges can make for a great ice breaker, even if guests are buying gifts for people they don't know. If you plan to make Secret Santa part of your holiday party this year, consider these tips to ensure it goes off smoothly.

- Start planning early. Hosts likely know everyone coming to their party, so they should take the lead and organize the Secret Santa exchange. Let guests know as early as possible, even including the information in the party invitations, so they have time to shop.
- Make it optional. Forcing people to

mingle and exchange gifts is never a good idea. Give guests the option to participate ask them to indicate if they will or won't when they RSVP.

- Set a reasonable gift limit. Figure out a budget that works for everyone. There are plenty of gifts to be had for \$20 and under. Gag gifts or "dollar store" gift themes can ensure no one goes overboard in terms of dollar value.

- Consider a wish list. Asking participants to fill out wish lists ensures that their Secret Santa buddy will have an idea where to start shopping.

- Enlist a digital helper. Technology can make organizing Secret Santa exchanges even easier. Elfster is an online gift exchange app that can help hosts effectively organize their Secret Santa parties.

Fun is key to Secret Santa exchanges, so make sure to keep things lighthearted when planning the party and exchanging gifts.





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Merry Christmas to you and yours. We wish you all the best, and we look forward to seeing you soon in the New Year!



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MAKE HOLIDAY DECORATING EASIER THIS YEAR

It is not the holiday season until homes, stores and town centers are decorated in lights and tinsel. When entire neighborhoods are enhanced by bows and animated figurines, the celebratory tone is set and decorations can trigger happy feelings associated with holiday gatherings.

Some people find holiday decorating enjoyable and eagerly anticipate taking out storage containers and sorting through all of their memory-laden trinkets, while others are less enthusiastic about readying their homes for the season. No matter which group you fall into, the following are some simple tips to make holiday decorating easier.

- Plan to decorate on a day when you do not have any other responsibilities. Choose to decorate on a day when you can devote your full attention to decorating, avoiding a day when you might be distracted by other things. If you prefer to decorate alone, ask a friend to watch the kids or have a spouse take them out of the house for a few hours. If decorating is a family event, find a day when everyone's schedules are clear.

- Take out the decorations the day prior. Hauling boxes and containers from the attic or basement can take a while. Take some



time to move all of the decorating items to a main floor of the house the day or night before your decorating marathon. This way you won't get discouraged or tired by the task even before the real decorating has begun.

- Put the tree up first. The Christmas tree is the a focal point of holiday decorations, so

set up the tree and decorate it before you get started on decorating the rest of the house. If you do not get to all of your other decorating, at least the tree will be ready and your home will still have some holiday appeal. Once the lights are on, decorating the tree is a great activity for keeping the kids busy while you handle other jobs.

- Divide and conquer. Nothing makes holiday decorating go faster than delegating decorating tasks. Assign specific tasks to your helpers. Put one person in charge of decorating the living room while another handles the outside lights, wreaths and inflatable items.

- Turn on the tunes. Working to music frequently takes your mind off of the work and will help pass the time more quickly. Have your favorite holiday playlist at the ready and turn up the volume. Sing along to the carols or contemporary songs while you are elbow-deep in decorations.

- Take some breaks. Working hungry or tired may lead to sloppy work or frustration. There's little chance of untangling a knot in the lights with your patience in tact if you haven't eaten for hours. Plan some time for lunch while you sit and rest. Survey the work you've done and make a list of the next steps.

After the hard work of decorating, you'll likely have a sense of accomplishment. Now it's time to enjoy the holiday scene and prepare for the excitement of the weeks ahead.

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Minimize live Christmas tree mess



Face a tree's trunk toward the front of the car to prevent needles from becoming loose and falling off in your home.

noble, Fraser, Nordmann, and Turkish, usually last the longest. Douglas fir, Scotch pine, balsam, and grand fir trees also last long after being cut. Spruce trees, which are usually the least expensive variety on lots, may only last two to three weeks.

Wrap and transport

Ask the tree seller to freshly cut the bottom of the tree and wrap the entire tree in twine so it will be easier to move. Place the tree on the roof of your car with the trunk facing the front of the car. This way the wind will not fan out the branches and loosen up needles.

Choose the right location

It may seem like a good idea to put the tree right in front of a picture window, but if that window receives ample sunlight, the tree may dry out more quickly, leading to falling needles. The same can be said for putting a tree too close to a heating source, like a fireplace, radiator or heating vent. A cool, shaded area is best for keeping trees fresher longer. Fit the tree in the stand while it is still outdoors and wrapped up and then move the entire product inside to the right spot. This helps minimize dirt, bark and needles getting all over the room.

A Christmas tree is often the centerpiece of holiday decorating. Trees come in many shapes and sizes, both real and artificial. Those looking for a more authentic tree gravitate toward real trees, with their rich, earthy smell and beautiful boughs of green.

While the sights and smells of real trees are what draw many people in, live trees do require more maintenance than their artificial alternatives. Falling pine needles and sap are part of the live-tree package, as is regular watering and some initial tree preparation. However, those who have their hearts set on a real tree can employ some strategies to minimize the mess.

Buy a fresh tree

Christmas tree lots may begin to crop up before Thanksgiving, meaning trees will have been cut and shipped weeks before. The tree you put up in your home may be at least two months old by Christmas Day. Also, trees that are open to full sunlight at tree lots can dry out prematurely.

When shopping, look for trees that seem freshly cut and have good needle retention. Grab a branch and see if the needles remain intact. Give the tree trunk a bump on the ground and assess how many needles drop to the ground. Look at the color of the tree and determine if it is wilting. These may be signs that the tree is old and on its last legs.

Choose the right variety

Some varieties of tree have more staying power after being cut than others. So-called "true firs," such as

Time your removal

Removing a dried-out tree can be a cleaning disaster. It's better for the tree to make its exit before it withers. A tree can drink a gallon of water per day, so make sure the stand reservoir is adequately filled. Over time, though, the tree may stop taking in water. When this happens, it is best to take down the decorations and get ready for removal. Hiding a tree disposal bag under the tree skirt can make it easier to get the tree out to the curb. Some people find there's less mess by clipping off the branches and removing them in one lump, rather than navigating a full tree through small doorways.

Real Christmas trees can enhance holiday season ambiance and set the scene for the festivities to come. With the right care and prep work, homeowners can cut down on the mess associated with fresh trees.

Put safe travel at the top of holiday lists



The nation's highways and skyways experience an influx of travelers during the holiday season. People are on the move over the last five weeks of the calendar year, traveling near and far to spend the holidays with friends and family members they hold dear. In fact, the United States Department of Transportation says the Thanksgiving and Christmas/New Year's holiday periods are among the busiest long-distance travel periods of the year.

Roughly 90 percent of holiday travel takes place by personal vehicle, followed by air, bus and train, says the USDOT. With so many people on the move, the risk for accidents and other incidents increases. To keep the holidays enjoyable and safe, travelers should remember to exercise caution.

- **Schedule a tune-up.** Make sure your car is in good working order. Check the air pressure in tires and get an oil change if it is time. Other cars on the road may kick up salt and other debris from the roadways, so be certain to top off windshield washer fluid to maintain adequate visibility.

- **Leave plenty of time.** Expect traffic and leave extra time to get to your destination. Hurrying may cause you to increase your speed or make risky maneuvers behind the wheel that can increase your risk of accident and injury. Leave extra time as well for traveling through weather conditions like snow and sleet.

- **Know various routes to the destination.** Volume or accidents can result in road detours. Keep a paper map in the car or rely on navigation systems.

- **Leave room for emergency supplies.** Stock your vehicle with a change of clothes, blankets, snacks and drinks, jumper cables, a flashlight, and additional safety supplies. Drivers should be prepared in the event of a breakdown.

- **Keep children entertained.** A long trip can seem longer with unhappy children in tow. Plan ahead with some activities to keep kids occupied while on the road. Games, books, videos, and music can fill the time. Make frequent stops so kids can get out of the car and stretch. And don't forget to pack some food and drinks to cut down on time-consuming rest stop visits.

- **Take turns driving.** Spending long hours behind the wheel can cause fatigue. Share driving responsibilities with another adult passenger to help avoid drowsy driving conditions. If no one else is available to share the load, pull over and rest from time to time.

- **Secure packages and luggage.** Tie down items on roof racks and in rear cargo areas of SUVs and vans so they're not moving around freely. In the event of an accident, items that are not secured can be dangerous. Pack gifts and other items so that the driver's line of sight is not impeded.

If holiday travel is in your future, remember to make safety a priority.

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Ready your home for holiday guests



The song may say, “there’s no place like home for the holidays,” yet many people find their holidays are just as well spent in someone else’s abode. The popular motor club federation AAA says that more than 90 million Americans journey 50 miles or more from home during the year-end holiday season, and each year the number of travelers increases.

When opening their homes to loved ones and friends, hosts want to make their guests feel welcome. Fortunately, there are many ways to do just that.

Establish a cozy nook

Determine where your guests will be sleeping. Do not worry if you do not have a separate guest room. There are other things you can do, such as giving up your own bedroom for the duration of their stay. Otherwise, turn another spot into a guest area. A den or living room with a pullout sofa also might work. Children’s rooms also are another idea. Let young children camp out in the living room or the basement while you turn their rooms into spots for your guests. The kids will appreciate the novelty of setting up sleeping bags, and guests will get some measure of privacy.

Have separate guest amenities

Invest in some lush towels and wash cloths reserved for guests.

Also, have comfortable sheets on hand. Be sure all linens are freshly washed, and have a drawer or two available in case guests want to unpack their suitcases. Keep some toiletries stocked as well. A few extra toothbrushes, mouthwash, soap, and other personal items may be needed to accommodate forgetful guests.

Provide creature comforts

Guests won’t be used to the rooms in your house, so be sure that you offer a light for a nightstand and an alarm clock. Nightlights placed in the bathroom or hallway can illuminate unfamiliar surroundings. Keep a fan on hand so that guests can adjust the temperature in their rooms and also if they need a little white noise while they sleep. A tray with books, magazines and the Wi-Fi code also may be appreciated.

Separate bathroom facilities

If possible, devote one bathroom in the house for guests’ use. This way they will have all the privacy they need. Ask if there are any special products they like to use in the



bathroom, helping to cut down on the items guests need to bring with them.

Stock favorite foods

Make a list of the foods that your guests enjoy and plan a shopping trip to stock up on these items. Encourage guests to have free reign of the kitchen, helping themselves to snacks or whatever is desired. Remember to ask about any dietary restrictions, including allergies.

Deep clean your home

Clear away unnecessary clutter and give floors a fresh wash or vacuuming, especially if you have pets. Pay special attention to showers and the bathroom itself. You don’t want guests tripping over your belongings.

A few special and simple touches can quickly prepare a home for holiday hosting and entertaining.

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HOMEMADE DINNER ROLLS FOR THOSE WITH GLUTEN ALLERGIES

Holiday dinners vary depending on the household, but certain staples seem to pop up no matter where you sit down to enjoy your holiday meal. Dinner rolls are one such staple, as few things supplement a hearty holiday meal better than freshly baked homemade dinner rolls.

Men and women with gluten allergies may want to avoid traditional dinner rolls, but holiday hosts can take steps to ensure everyone gets to enjoy dinner rolls regardless of their dietary restrictions. The following recipe for “Dinner Rolls” from Jeanne Sauvage’s “Gluten-Free Baking” (Chronicle Books) is a gluten-free version of a beloved holiday staple.

Dinner Rolls

Makes 18 rolls

- 4 tablespoons granulated sugar
- 2 cups warm milk (about 110 F)
- 2 tablespoons active dry yeast
- 3 cups gluten-free all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons xanthan gum
- 4 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 extra-large eggs
- ¼ cup neutral-flavored oil such as rice bran or canola
- 2 teaspoons vinegar, preferably apple cider
- Melted unsalted butter for brushing
- Tapioca flour for dusting

Brush 18 standard muffin cups (one 12-cup pan and one 6-cup pan) with melted butter and dust with tapioca flour.

In a small bowl, whisk 1 tablespoon of the sugar into the warm milk. Whisk in the yeast to dissolve. Set aside to proof. The mixture will get foamy. If your kitchen is warm, the mixture will foam quickly, so watch it to make sure it does not overflow the bowl.

In a medium bowl, mix together the all-purpose flour, xanthan gum, baking powder, salt, and remaining 3 tablespoons sugar.

In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, beat the eggs on medium speed until foamy, about 3 minutes. Add the oil and beat for 2 more minutes. Reduce the speed to low, add the vinegar and beat to combine. Add the yeast mixture and beat to mix. Add the flour mixture and beat to combine, then increase the speed to medium-high and beat for 3 minutes longer.



Distribute the dough equally among the prepared muffin cups and fill them about three-quarters full. With a sharp knife that has been dipped in tapioca flour, cut a deep slash in the top of each roll. Dip the knife in flour before each cut, and don't worry if a little extra tapioca flour is left on top of the rolls.

Preheat the oven to 375 F.

Let the dough stand in a warm, draft-free place to rise until doubled in bulk, about 40 minutes.

Brush the top of each roll with melted butter. Bake until the tops are a nice golden brown, about 20 minutes. If they start to brown too quickly, loosely tent the rolls with aluminum foil. Remove the rolls to wire racks to cool. If you are serving them immediately, it's nice to put them in a tea towel-lined blanket to keep warm.

Store in an airtight container for up to 3 days.

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Aint Luverta's Dr. Pepper Cake

Makes one 9- by 13-inch cake

Cake

- 2 cups all-purpose flour, sifted
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 2 cups granulated sugar
- 1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter
- 1½ cups miniature marshmallows
- 3 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1 cup Dr. Pepper
- 2 eggs
- 1½ cups buttermilk
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Dr. Pepper Frosting

- ½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, softened
- 6 tablespoons Dr. Pepper
- 3 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1 1-pound box confectioners' sugar, sifted
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 cup chopped pecans

Preheat the oven to 350 F.

Grease, but do not flour, a 9- by 13-inch pan. Set it aside.

To make the cake, in a large bowl, sift together the flour and baking soda. Gradually stir in the sugar. Set aside.

In a saucepan, heat the butter, marshmallows, cocoa, and Dr. Pepper. Stir constantly until the butter and the marshmallows are melted. Do not allow the mixture to boil. Pour the marshmallow mixture over the flour mixture. Beat well. Set aside. In another bowl, beat the eggs until they are light and fluffy. Stir in the buttermilk and vanilla extract. Mix well. Beat the egg mixture into the flour mixture until well blended and the batter is smooth. Pour the batter into the prepared pan. Bake for 50 to 55 minutes, or until the center of cake springs back when lightly touched. Let the cake cool on a rack for 10 minutes.

To make the frosting, in a saucepan, combine the butter, Dr. Pepper and cocoa powder. Bring the mixture to a boil over low heat, stirring constantly. Remove the pan from the heat. Gradually stir in the confectioners' sugar until the mixture is smooth, then fold in the vanilla extract and pecans. Spread over the warm cake.

A tasty treat for holiday guests

Hosting family and friends is one of the joys of the holiday season. For many families, holiday gatherings are the one time of year when all family members get together to enjoy time as a family.

Holiday hosts not only have a lot on their plates, but they also want to ensure their guests end up with lots on their plates. Food plays a central role at holiday parties and dinners, and hosts who want to try their hand at creating a decadent treat their guests have likely never tasted before, can consider the following recipe for "Aint Luverta's Dr. Pepper Cake" courtesy of Patty Pinner's "Sweets: Soul Food Desserts & Memories" (Ten Speed Press).

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Until next time: How to pack your holiday decorations

Soon it will be time to bid farewell to another holiday season. After the gifts have been unwrapped and the last of the turkey leftovers are long gone, the only task that remains is to put away all of those holiday decorations that have been decking the halls since Thanksgiving.

Although packing holiday decorations may not be a favorite task, the following strategies can save both time and effort.

• **Get motivated.** The first supply you need when putting holiday decorations away is a healthy dose of motivation. It's easy to put off the taking down of lights or rolling up of holiday garlands, but the earlier you start the more quickly you can move on from the holiday season. Plan a day when you can pack away decorations, and do not schedule anything else for that day.

• **Purchase storage bins.** Stock up on storage bins as they go on sale. Even if you end up with extra bins you ultimately don't need to store holiday decorations, you will no doubt find another use for them.



Choose bins of various sizes and don't be afraid to use takeout containers, which can hold smaller items and be stacked inside of larger bins to keep everything neat and organized. Zip-top

storage bags are also handy for ornament hooks and other small trinkets.

• **Find cushioning material.** Fragile ornaments will need to be packed in some sort of soft wrapping to prevent breakage. Tissue paper, newspaper, old dish towels, and even faux polyester "snow" can be used to line bins and boxes. Label accordingly so you can isolate the breakable items.

• **Start with the tree.** If you have a live tree, this should be the first item you remove. The longer

the tree dries out, the bigger the mess it creates. Take down the lights and spool onto an empty paper towel tube or package into individual plastic bags to avoid knots and kinks. Thread a tree bag over the top of the empty tree and scoop around the bottom to contain as many pine needles as possible. Drag the tree outdoors and dispose or recycle according to neighborhood collection guidelines. Vacuum up any fallen needles. If you have an artificial tree, take the same steps, but store the tree away for next year.

• **Divide your home into quadrants.** You likely use the same decorations in the same places each year. To make decorating easier next year, dismantle holiday displays and pack them up according to specific areas of the home. For example, store all picture window decorations in one bin and label thusly. Continue to store decorations according to the room where they are hung. Items that are used strictly for outdoors can be grouped together and stored in the garage.

• **Use a gift wrap**

organizer. Under-the-bed storage containers are ideal for storing gift wrap and assorted accessories. You also can use a hanging shoe organizer to store bows, tape and name tags. Wrapping paper rolls also can be stored horizontally over rafters in the attic or garage.

• **Be especially careful with candles.** Pack

candles separately from other items, as candles must be kept in a relatively cool area so they do not melt when temperatures rise.

• **Keep an empty bin handy.** Use this bin to store any gifts or decorations you buy throughout the year. This way you won't forget where you stashed them.

Christmas tree recycling

When choosing a real Christmas tree for holiday celebrations, consumers should think about the many ways that trees can be repurposed after the holiday season. Some towns collect discarded trees to use them for various purposes. However, homeowners can get in on the action as well. The Old Farmer's

Almanac offers these great ideas for post-holiday tree use.

• Prop up the tree near a bird feeder to provide another perch and shelter to birds that stick close to home in winter, such as chickadees and finches.

• String the tree with various treats for birds and put it in a sheltered location. Ideas include homemade suet,

cranberries and millet.

• Mulch the tree and use it in the garden in the spring.

• Use boughs to insulate perennials in the garden.

• Keep some branches to use as kindling in a wood stove or fireplace, or as aromatic logs for next year's yule fire.

• Sink an old tree in a personal pond. Fish and

tadpoles will live and lay eggs around this sheltered area.

• Collect some pine needles and sew them into fabric packets to make scented sachets for closets or drawers.

There are many imaginative ways to come up with handy uses for Christmas trees once the holiday season ends.



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Help make your poinsettias last longer

Poinsettias are synonymous with the holiday season. These colorful plants brighten up homes with their vibrant hues in variations of red, white and pink, making them a holiday decoration many people cannot live without.

While they're most visible during the often chilly holiday season, poinsettias prefer warm weather. Poinsettias are native to Central America and originally flourished in an area of southern Mexico. The Aztecs used the plant for decorative and medicinal purposes.

The poinsettia may have remained a regional plant if not for the efforts of Joel Roberts Poinsett, who was the first United States Ambassador to Mexico under President James Madison. Poinsett, who would later found the Smithsonian Institution, had a love of botany and became enamored with the brilliant red plants he saw in Mexico. Eventually, Poinsett began growing the plants at home in South Carolina, and friends and others soon coveted them.

Poinsettias are beautiful and the bracts (modified leaves) can be vibrantly colored. That signature vibrancy is why many people would like to preserve their poinsettias to last beyond the New Year, which is possible with the right care. The following are some tips, courtesy of Mother Nature's Network, Habersham Gardens, Oregon Live, and Phoenix Flower Shops, to keep poinsettias thriving past the holiday season.

- Start with healthy plants that have full leaves, bracts and deep colors.
- Poinsettias do best when the

temperature is between 65 and 75 F. Temperatures below that or drafts from cold windows can cause leaves to drop.

- Position the plant in a room that gets indirect sunlight for at least six hours per day. If direct sunlight can't be avoided, diffuse the light with a sheer curtain.

- Poinsettias need well-drained soil. Overwatering or allowing roots to sit in wet soil can cause the leaves to fall off prematurely. Water thoroughly only when the pot looks dry. In households with temperatures around 70 F, the plant should be watered about once a week.

- Fertilize the plant after the blooming season with a balanced, all-purpose fertilizer.

- Try placing poinsettias in or near a bathroom, as they prefer high humidity.

It may be possible to get poinsettias to rebloom next season. Allow the poinsettias to dry out a little more in the spring. In May, cut about four inches from each stem to produce a lush, full plant during the winter. The plants can be moved outside in June and during the summer, but keep them away from direct sunlight. Return the poinsettias indoors beginning around October. Make sure the plants get at least 12 hours of darkness per day for around eight weeks in October and November. This will help them develop a deep hue and bloom on time for Christmas. Poinsettias are synonymous with the holiday season. These colorful plants brighten up homes with their vibrant hues in variations of red, white and pink, making them a holiday decoration many people cannot live without.





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A filling morning meal for overnight holiday guests

Many families enjoy hosting overnight guests come the holiday season. Waking up to a full house

and enjoying a leisurely breakfast with family and friends is a great way to begin a new day, and such moments make for great opportunities to catch up with loved ones.



The following recipe for “Gratin of Eggs, Leeks, Bacon, and St. André Cheese” from Betty Rosbottom and Susie Cushner’s “Sunday Brunch” (Chronicle Books) includes the staples of a traditional breakfast: bacon, eggs and toast. But this dish also can be assembled the night before and simply popped into the oven the next morning once everyone wakes up, making it an ideal morning meal that allows hosts to join in the breakfast table conversation.

Gratin of Eggs, Leeks, Bacon, and St. André Cheese

Serves 6

- 1 baguette, about 2½ to 3 inches in diameter
- 6 thick slices bacon, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 2 cups chopped leeks, white and light green parts
- 6 ounces St. André cheese, well chilled (see note)
- 6 eggs
- 2½ cups half-and-half
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 tablespoon minced flat-leaf parsley or chives
- Unsalted butter, for the baking dish
- Generous 2 pinches of cayenne pepper

1. Arrange a rack at center position and preheat the oven to 350 F. Generously butter a 9- by 13-inch baking dish.

2. Cut enough ½-inch-thick slices from the baguette to make a single layer in the baking dish. (You will probably need between 20 and 24 slices; save extra slices for another use.) Arrange the slices on a baking sheet and bake without turning until crisp and very lightly colored, 10 minutes. Remove and arrange the slices in the baking dish.

3. In a medium, heavy frying pan set over medium heat, fry the bacon pieces until crisp and browned, 5 minutes. Drain on paper towels.

4. Pour off all but 1 tablespoon of the drippings and return the frying pan to medium heat. Add the leeks and cook, stirring, until just softened, 4 to 5 minutes. Sprinkle the leeks and bacon over the bread slices in the baking dish.

5. Cut the St. André cheese with its rind into ½-inch cubes and scatter them over the leeks and bacon in the baking dish. In a medium bowl, whisk the eggs to blend, and then whisk in the half-and-half, salt and cayenne. Pour the mixture into the baking dish. Let the gratin stand at least 1 hour, or cover the pan with plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to 24 hours. (If the dish has been refrigerated, let it stand at room temperature for 30 minutes before baking if you have time. It also can go directly from the refrigerator to the oven but will take longer to cook.)

6. Bake the gratin until the egg mixture is set, the top is golden and the mixture is bubbly, 40 to 45 minutes (10 to 15 minutes longer if straight from the refrigerator). Remove and let cool for about 5 minutes. Sprinkle with minced parsley and serve hot.

(Note: St. André cheese is a mild, triple-cream French cheese with a white rind. It is available at many grocers and cheese stores. If you are unable to find it, you can substitute a triple-cream Brie.)

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Christmas tidbits to put you in the holiday spirit

The holiday season has arrived, and millions of people across the globe will be celebrating Christmas with their families and friends. The following are some interesting tidbits to share with your loved ones this holiday season.

- Each year, more than three billion Christmas cards are sent in the United States alone.
- In 350 AD, Pope Julius I, bishop of Rome, proclaimed Dec. 25 the official celebration date for the birth of Jesus Christ. Many historians and theologians have surmised that Christ really wasn't born this time of year, thanks to imagery and information from the Bible.
- Christmas carols began as an English custom called "wassailing." Individuals toasted

neighbors to a long and healthy life.

- Despite the common tale that three wise men paid homage to baby Jesus, the Bible never specifically calls out a number. Similarly, there's no specific indication that they visited the infant Jesus. Their visit may have occurred when Jesus was older.
- Santa Claus' modern look was inspired by writings from The Knickerbockers of New York and imagery from Clement Clarke Moore's "A Visit from St. Nicholas." Moore denied authoring the famous poem for 15 years after it was published anonymously, feeling the poem was beneath his talents.
- Santa has his own official postal code. It's H0 H0 H0.
- The song "Jingle Bells" was originally written

for Thanksgiving and not Christmas. People loved it so much that the lyrics were changed to fit Christmas.

- Christmas trees typically grow for 15 years before they're cut and sold. This means the trees sold today were likely planted in 2004.
- Christmas was not declared an official holiday in the United States until June 26, 1870.
- Before turkey, the traditional Christmas meal served in England was a pig's head and mustard.
- Male reindeer tend to shed their antlers in the winter. This means Santa's reindeer are likely female.
- Christ may have been born in a cave rather than a manger. According to the gospel of Luke, the shepherds that helped find shelter for Mary to give birth kept their flock

in a cave. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is built over a cave called the Grotto of the Nativity, where Jesus is believed to have been born.

- Many people may be less inclined to stand under mistletoe waiting for a kiss if they knew what "mistletoe" means in the ancient Germanic language. It literally means "dung on a twig," for the bird who eats the berries and then leaves seeds in droppings to propagate new plants.
- Each holiday season, PNC Wealth Management calculates the costs of the gifts in the song, "The 12 Days of Christmas." The price index for the gifts went from \$12,673 in 1984 to more than \$24,000 in 2011. The most expensive gift is the swimming swans.



How to make holiday wreaths the easy way

There are many different ways to decorate homes and businesses for the holidays. Tall evergreen trees are among the most visible symbols of the holiday season. However, wreaths hung on doors, windows or fences also are ubiquitous this time of year.

Wreaths adorn homes primarily during the holidays of Easter and Christmas. Wreaths have also been worn around the head or neck in ceremonial events around the globe for centuries. It is believed the first wreaths date back to ancient Greece and Rome. Members of the Greco-Roman society were known to hand-make ring-shaped items using fresh tree leaves, small fruits, flowers, and twigs. Oftentimes these headdresses symbolized a person's social status. Others suggest wreaths evolved to become a Christian symbol of immortality.

Regardless of how wreaths are viewed, many people like to display wreaths for the holidays. Wreaths can be purchased premade, but making a wreath on your own can make the holidays even more fun.

One of the easiest ways to make a wreath is to design it around a circular floral foam form. Gather supplies to make the wreath. For traditional wreaths, supplies will include sprigs of evergreen (real or artificial), ribbon, floral wire,

bows, and artificial berries. Working around the foam form, arrange the boughs of evergreen, using the floral wire to wrap or pin into the foam itself. Keep the layers coming until you get the desired coverage. Embellish with a ribbon or place a bow.

The blog A Piece of Rainbow says that creating a wreath jig is an easy way to make a wreath. Cut a dollar-store laundry basket bottom from the top ring to make a template, on which you can place wreath-making materials so they keep their circular form. Use floral wire or natural jute string to tie the materials together. Experiment with fresh evergreen, twigs, holly branches, or whatever materials you choose.

Thick card stock also can serve as the wreath template. Attach artificial flowers or leaves, spray snow, ornaments, or other items to the card stock ring with a firm adhesive.

Many craft stores sell wreath forms made of natural vines that have been strung in a ring. These can be decorated in their entirety or left a little sparse to let the natural twine show through.

Wreaths may seem like complicated creations. But a little imagination and the right materials is all it takes to create a homemade wreath.



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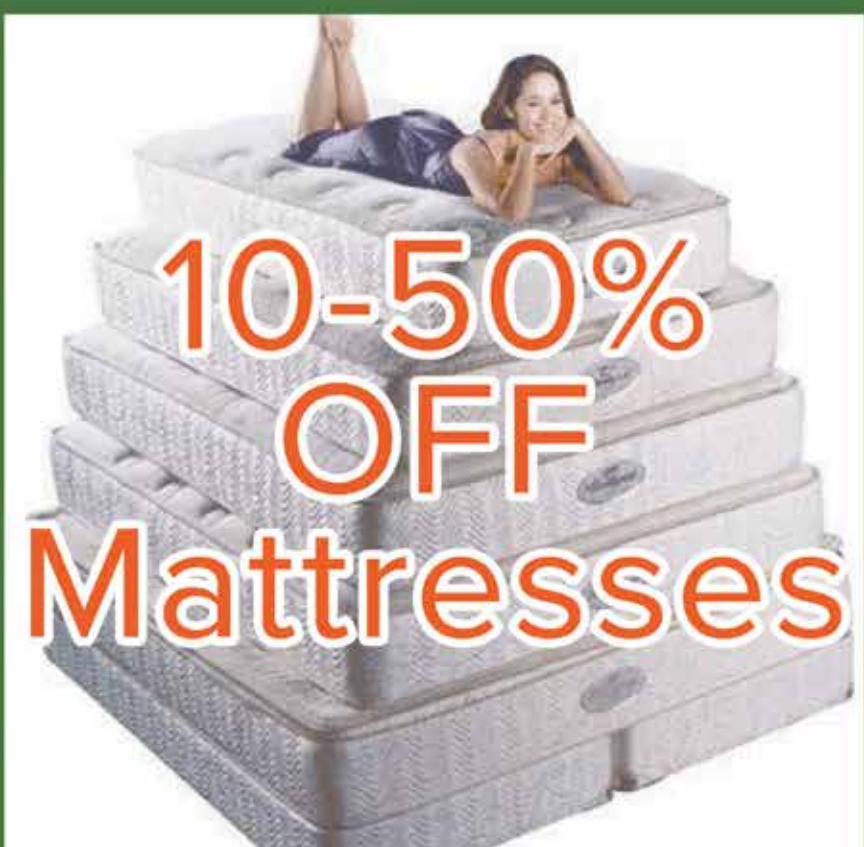
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