

As seen in the "Ask the Organizing Expert" Column in the *Lake Oswego Review* and the *West Linn Tidings*

Organizing Your Holiday Budget and Schedule

Question: How do I organize my holidays with a limited budget and a limited schedule?

I'm crazy for the holidays – always have been. In fact, I'm one of those people who *like* to see ornaments and stockings on store shelves in August. Still, the season has a way of creeping up, and before long, I'm rushing around while time tick-tick-ticks towards the big day. This year, more than ever, we need to conserve both time and money. But that doesn't mean we can't have a grand and splendid holiday season. The organizing trick for working with a tight budget and a tight schedule is to reduce options, and that means "simplify."

Simplify your Gifting: Crowded malls, congested parking lots and long lines suck the dazzle right out of Christmas. This year, try a "gift theme" and purchase your presents from one location. Spend an afternoon at a superb book store and get everyone on your list something awesome to read. Another theme: music – such as CDs, musicals on DVD, or iTunes gift cards. One more idea: services – stuff stockings with gift cards for spa treatments or piano lessons. Shopping online will save even more time and money (you won't be tempted to buy needless items, either).

Simplify your Décor: There's no need to spend excessive time or money on your décor. Look to nature and your own cupboards to create a chic and festive environment. Pine boughs, holly branches, bundles of wood, and pinecones are readily accessible in Oregon, perhaps in your own backyard – and they can fill your home with the sights and smells of the season. Empty your cabinets of anything red, gold, silver, crystal or otherwise sparkly. Use bowls, platters, trays and candlesticks to decorate tables and countertops. Fill them with ornaments or seasonal foods, like pomegranates or chestnuts. Votive candles and twinkle lights used liberally feel romantic. Add some trendy holiday music for a finishing touch.

Simplify your Baking: Cooking sessions that last from sunup till sundown worked for Grandma, but who has time for that anymore? Choose one "signature" item to bake this year, such as sugar cookies or fudge, and make several batches. Trade a dozen or so with various friends so you have an assortment of tasty treats in your freezer. Another idea is to bake savory appetizers while a pal bakes the sweets. Swap with each other and you both have a nice selection of nibbles ready for entertaining.

Simplify your Cards: The Christmas card used to serve as our annual check-in with distant friends and family. But the internet allows us to do that as often as we like, so no need to let the holiday card tradition bog you down. Last year I snapped a digital photo of my kids in the backyard and uploaded it to the Costco website. My cards were ready shortly thereafter and in the mail by day's end. Easy!

As confessed, I'm a Christmas fanatic. I'm forever tempted to bake more, decorate more, spend more, and give more. But I'm also a realist, and I know the quickest way to spoil the holidays is to fill it with the unnecessary and unmemorable. So decorate, shop, and bake; but not at the expense of enjoying your family, reconnecting with friends, having fun, refueling your spirit or reflecting on your blessings. Because if money or time were *not* an issue, isn't that what we'd want from the holidays anyway?

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