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Winter wonderlands

Taking the stress out of holiday decorating

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B&B Holiday Decorating, a company out of Des Plaines that offers festive design for residential, commercial and special events, supplied the lights for a home on Franklin Avenue in River Forest (above). The company offers an array of holiday decorating services, including roof-line lighting and pre-lit wreaths.

B&B Holiday Decorating



visually pleasing than the silvery or gold strands. For tables, clients not to overdo the garland by adding light strings.

"Single strands wrapped around the garland looks a little crazy," Weissman said.

Some of his clients like to change the look of their holiday décor from year to year, so Weissmann's firm rents decorations, including a stock of retro-aluminum trees and color wheels that were in vogue during the 1960s. But he also works with synthetic green and natural trees, and even has a secret tree farm in Wisconsin where he'll go and cut down trees for clients.

Many of his clients seek his advice on where to place the tree. Weissmann prefers putting the tree in front of the window, or ideally, next to the fireplace to make it more accessible for Santa. His partner, Sally Calendar, does the outdoor lighting displays.

Jim Stevens, of Rogers Park, has been using Weissmann's services for many years. The time-starved nightclub manager, who will soon be opening his own club in Andersonville, doesn't try to pass off Weissmann's work as his own. He usually hosts two parties during the holiday season, one for his large family consisting of 11 siblings and assorted nieces and nephews; the other for friends and business associates.

"They know my shortcomings and frustrations with tree lights and decorating," Stevens said. "I like having the house decorated, I just don't like doing it. I've been using Drew (Weissmann) for years. Everyone has their own holiday where they get a little crazy. Some people like Halloween, I like Christmas."

His most challenging job was a woman in Lake Bluff who just wanted a series of trees throughout her house. "We lit and decorated about 350 trees of different sizes," Weissmann said. "Her main grouping was in the entry way. Other trees were

It's the most wonderful time of the year. There will be parties for hosting and marshmallows for toasting, but you haven't even purchased the ingredients for your Uncle Billy's secret eggnog recipe yet, let alone decked out your house, condo or apartment.

Relax, the holidays are supposed to be fun, not stressful. And there are companies out there that will help you turn your home into an elegant and tasteful winter wonderland instead of something resembling the Griswolds' house in National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation.

"I've found in the city that a lot of my clients just don't have the time and want to enjoy the decorations," said Andrew Weissmann, who grew up with his mother's elaborate, 200-piece nativity village placed beneath a 12-foot aluminum Christmas tree. "Others just want to look good for their guests."

Weissmann added holiday decorating services to his River West design firm, Andrew Weissmann Signature Designs, five years ago. He finds that many of his clients are tree light-and garland-challenged. Some of his clients bring him in to organize decorating parties, using their own family ornaments.

"I'll light the tree," Weissmann said. "I do all the background stuff and their guests will add ornaments to the tree. I'll finish off the look with garlands."

Weissmann advises clients not go overboard and steers them away from decorating the antique bookcase or china cabinet with garland and lights. "It takes away from the beauty of the furniture," he said. "I like real clean decorating, basically by putting a tree and if you have a fireplace, decorating the mantle."

For over the windows, Weissmann likes to add garland, preferably natural or synthetic greens, which he says are more durable. For tables, he adds Christmas florals (ditch the Poinsettias). He also advises

Helpful tips for decorating

Trimming the tree

For easier dismantling, drape-don't wind-the lights around branches. If you're buying a synthetic tree, try to avoid the pre-lit trees. Most light strands on pre-lit trees stop working after a few years' use, which means you have to go out and buy another.

After you've draped the lights, finish the tree off by hanging garland.

Map out your ornaments. Starting at the top of the tree, hang ornaments in triangular patters with the tip pointing upwards, and spiral down the tree to create a more uniform look.

Complete the look by adding a Christmas village or nativity scene beneath your tree.

Make sure figures and buildings are scale to one another. Many designer companies sell collectible pieces that are on the pricier side, which you can add to your village or nativity scene each year; but you can also find inexpensive village or nativity sets at the dollar store or other retail outlets, like CVS Pharmacy or Walgreen's.

Decking the yard

Your yard doesn't have to look like Vegas or the landing strip at O'Hare International Airport. Pick a color scheme and stick to it.

Use white lights as the main color on the house; for bushes or trees, choose one or two colors of single-colored light strands, or add green and red floodlights to shine on evergreens and shrubbery.

Wrap tree trunks with single-colored light strands.

Most lights that are manufactured these days, while safer, are disposable and intended to be cut off outdoor landscaping. Just don't forget to them in your recycle containers for trash collection.

placed on her balcony and loft area that were all lit and decorated. She bought all her own ornaments and some were all the same style ornament and shape."

Bill Cielinski and Brian Galuski started their outdoor holiday decorating company, B&B Decorating, 10 years ago when both were in high school. Cielinski, who by day is an electrical engineer, and Galuski, a technical engineer, run the business as a sideline from their home in Des Plaines exclusively during the holiday season. They employ three crews that turn yards into winter wonderlands throughout the Chicago region. This year, they expect to hang more than 800,000 outdoor lights that they order from a private distributor during the summer.

"If you saw the homes where we grew up, we went crazy with our parents' houses," Cielinski said. "When I was 12, I made a tree farm on my parents' lawn with conduit and lights. The middle tree was 25-feet tall and the power line was five feet away. My father was just hoping that I wouldn't kill myself."

When word got around that two crazy high school kids were willing to hang lights off of high roof peaks, B&B Decorating took off. "We just like hanging lights," Galuski said.

B&B provides no-hassle decorating, including lights, cords, timers, garland, everything customers need to light up their houses. Cielinski said their customers consist of two types: wives that don't want their husbands clambering on the roof, and husbands that are just sick of putting up outdoor lights year after year. Both work with clients to create stunning outdoor light designs.

"Customers tell us what they're looking for. They know they want to do the roof in white lights," Galuski said. "We tell them what will look good. We'll put out bushes that will accent the roof, different things that will make the house pop. We use real and fake garland, wreaths that go up to six feet tall over doorways and some that hang over fences and garage doors accenting the houses. It's a culmination of everyone's efforts."

One of the most common outdoor holiday decorating mistakes, Cielinski said, are that people don't use enough lights. He encourages clients to stay away from the multi-color flashing light strands.

Galuski says they are on a first-name basis with most of their customers, who have been using B&B Decorating for years, including one guy in Hawthorne Woods, who hires them to hang 50,000 lights around his two-acre yard that sits on a pond.

"We spend all day there with about 10 guys," Galuski said. "I'm up on the roof all day for eight hours running connections and cords. "Everything is mapped out perfectly to make it work. We'll outline the whole gutter line, peaks, the runners on the roof, the maples and bushes."

B&B's fees for installing outdoor holiday lights start at \$500; most of their accounts, Cielinski said, average out at \$1,000, but that includes set-up, labor, service calls and dismantling.

The sagging economy and rising energy costs hasn't hurt their business, said Cielinski.

"I had one woman tell me she'd rather starve than not be able to put up Christmas lights."

Both designers consulted for this story advised against using the inflatable Santas and other figures, which draw attention away from the light display. "We'll put them up for client if they ask for them," said Bill Cielinski of B&B Decorating.