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HOT TO TROT

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TIME TO LET GO

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Christmas for keeps

Four pages of decorations and gifts that will last for more than 12 days **P6**

Instead of baubles that barely last until January, invest in beautiful items to use through the year. By **Katrina Burroughs** and **Emma Wells**

How are you feeling this Christmas? A combination of twitchy and hopeful about covers it for us. We know from Mervyn King's cheery inflation report last month that we mustn't "hang out the bunting" just yet, but prepare ourselves for a "long and hard" climb out of recession next year. Trouble is, we really, really fancy a bit of bunting. There's a new decade about to begin and a whiff of economic recovery in the air. Surely we can open up the coffers a crack? Just as long as we spend as wisely as three wise men in a sagacity competition?

The answer is to cheer up your winter interiors with decorative homewares that are perfect for yuletide celebrations, but can also be used for entertaining all year round. Nothing throwaway. No one-season wonders. Stylish kit that will help us hold on to that festive feeling as public services are cut and taxes rise. This year, the theme of the season is Christmas for Keeps.

THIS TIME IT'S PERSONAL

The truth about Christmas decorating trends is that, no matter whether the hot new look is "gothic yule" with black tinsel, or a surreal festive scene featuring upside-down trees, your home will probably look pretty much like last year. Unless, that is, like the interior designer Antonia Stewart, you are decorating the first Christmas tree of your own. "Obviously I used to help out my parents doing our tree when we were little," she says, thoroughly overexcited, "but in terms of having autonomy over my own look, this is the first year."

Stewart, 35, is a decorator who specialises in a warm, relaxed "modern English" style, understated and subtly coloured. Tutored by her 15-month-old daughter, Serena, and five nephews and nieces under the age of seven, she is especially shrewd at building into her rooms a resistance to "little jammy fingers": striped rather than plain carpets, a touch of pattern on the walls, plenty of pictures and photos, but few ornaments at grabbable height.

She and her husband, Henry, 37, a banker, moved to a five-bedroom Victorian terraced house in southwest London a year ago. On Christmas Day last year, the couple had scarcely unpacked their furniture, but this time around Stewart has taken great delight in seasonal decorating, starting with the front door: an outside, welcoming natural-foliage wreath, set with dried fruits, chilli and cinnamon sticks (see panel, right), makes a big entrance.

"I wanted everything to be warm and homely," she says. "So there are red and white gingham hearts, felt carol singers and stockings, tin painted parcels and stars, and lots of Gisela Graham animals, strung throughout with white lights." A crop of golden pears, and old-fashioned crystal and pearl-bead stars, add a touch of grown-up glamour (from £11; 0870 241 3590, plumo.com), offset by paper chains and snowflakes made by the children. All will be treasured for Christmases to come.



Antonia Stewart loves these old-fashioned crystal and pearl-bead stars from Plumo

Not just for Christmas

TOP TABLES

There are some lovely new linens this year — and, as long as you steer clear of the ones with Santa motifs, most of the embroidered runners and printed placemats will serve just as well for other celebrations. The Christmas table linen at Scandi Living (01428 681474, scandiliving.com), especially Linum's

Tara runners (£25) and Antoinette table mats (£7), is a joyful combination of festive and folksy. Heal's currently has a constellation of crimson felt star-shaped placemats, coasters and napkin rings (from £4 a coaster; 0870 024 0780, heals.co.uk). On a slimmer budget, look at the Snowflake placemat in plum from Dunelm Mill (£3; 0845 165 6565,

dunelm-mill.com). If you fancy some new glassware, the top tumblers this winter are the gorgeous thick red glasses with engraved stars at Ben Pentreath (£9; 020 7430 2526, benpentreath.com). And Conran has tall, red, hand-blown wineglasses by Nicci Green (£7.50 each, champagne flutes £7.95; 0844 848 4000, conranshop.co.uk).

"NO ONE-SEASON WONDERS. NOTHING THROWAWAY. THIS IS STYLISH KIT THAT WILL HELP US HOLD ON TO THAT FESTIVE FEELING"

VITAL VESSELS

Our favourite find this winter has been metalware by a Swedish firm, Pluto, including openwork bowls made from a thicket of branch and leaf shapes (£35; 01865 248850, northlightdesign.co.uk). For craftwork that you'll prize for ever, try one of Maya Selway's silver bowls. Based on simple, traditional Japanese shapes, and made from recycled silver, they are luminously lovely (Kishu bowl, 6cm x 10cm x 10cm, £450; 07956 980851, mayaselway.com).

Eva Solo's silver maple-leaf dish is pleasingly organic (30cm wide, from £98; 01423 563260, paper-tiger.co.uk). For a cheap and very cheerful option — pretty containers for fruit and nuts — try Bambu's woven bamboo dishes, which come in citrus yellows, greens and shocking pink (£12 for a trio of round baskets; 01380 818515, greentulip.co.uk).

LIGHT UP YOUR LIFE

Extra lighting is the perfect decoration for any minor festivity. In the case of tea lights, more is more, so stock up. The best this year include coloured hanging holders from Rockett St George (£14.95 for six; 020 8350 5450, rockettstgeorge.co.uk) and glass ones called Kivi, made by Iitala, which come in a rainbow of clear and frosted colours (from £9; 020 7584 2066, www.skandium.com).

Fairy lights have been liberated from the Christmas tree, and now appear at after-dark parties all year round. Eccentric offers sets of 25 sparkly, low-energy colour-changing LEDs (£14; 020 7739 3888, eccentric.co.uk). For classic lighting, you can't beat elegant silver candlesticks; a funkier alternative is the Ravello five-arm crystal candelabra, in black, red or clear, available at Heal's (from £200; 0870 024 0780, heals.co.uk).

ALL WRAPPED UP

Woven Welsh blankets from Hen & Hammock, in muted checks, will be a year-round treat (150cm x 120cm, £20; 01844 217060, henandhammock.co.uk). From Klippan, the stylish Swedish textiles firm, comes a lovely woolen blanket decorated with coloured rings (130cm x 180cm, £120; 01865 248850, northlightdesign.co.uk). And the hand-printed quilts from Lulu and Nat (fuchsia butterfly king-size quilt, £273; 020 7371 8756, luluandnat.com) will bring the colours of the Indian subcontinent to your chilly home.

If you've been really, really good this year, you might deserve a special treat. The Rug Company has just launched some hand-woven wool wall tapestries, including a design by Rob Ryan, the artist behind the highly fashionable cutouts, featuring fanciful images of lovers, hearts, birds, keys and snippets of homespun wisdom. It's called We Had Everything, and is a reminder to count our blessings (100cm x 100cm, £895; 020 7229 5148, therugcompany.info). That's not a bad Christmas message — certainly better than banning bunting.

See overleaf for gift ideas for the house-proud and green-fingered