

Give and Feast: Organize for the Holidays

Are you packing your ghosts and discarding your jack-o'-lantern? Then you know that Thanksgiving is right around the corner, followed by the "busy season" as people prepare for Christmas, Hanukkah, and other solstice-time celebrations. The holidays are a time of joy and celebration, but all too often, stress and sadness come with the season. Family members and friends who have passed away are remembered, and the hubbub of parties, events, and vacation days can strain anyone's schedule. Greeting cards, family gatherings, decorating, and gift giving all take of work. But a pinch of planning and a dash of restraint can lift your eyes and your heart to see the beauty of the season.

Financial stress is epidemic during the holidays as many, many people over-spend and over-buy. If I had the authority, I would ban all over-buying and over-spending. In spite of the economic downturn, the stores will still be full of people searching for the perfect gifts for all and sundry. Don't get me wrong, I like giving and receiving as much as anyone. But as a professional organizer, I've seen a fortune in well intentioned gifts discarded as so much clutter.

Here's my advice: Try to only buy things that the recipient will need, will like, and will use. If you're stumped, give a less-traditional gift, such as a museum pass or membership or a charitable donation made on their behalf. Alternatively, give gifts that will be consumed quickly.

In any case, now is a good time to make your holiday gift list, keeping in mind a budget for the year. Do it now, while you have plenty of time to ask people what they want and to start comparing prices. Your list and budget should save time and will definitely help you resist impulse buys when you're out shopping. While you're at it, make a list of what you want. Ask for what you will need, will like, and will use.

Now is also the time to think about sending holiday cards – if you're going to send some. Find (or create) the cards you want and prepare your envelopes. You can write them a few a time if you start early. The general rule of thumb for Christmas cards is to send them sometime between Thanksgiving and New Year's, although people usually wait until the end of the first week of December. So for other holiday greetings, plan on sending cards two or three weeks before the date. You can try online greeting

card services such as [SendOutCards](#). They'll print and mail the cards for you. Just choose your cards, add your photos, write your message, and send them with a click of the mouse. For a few extra dollars, you can even use your own handwriting or signature.

You may also be faced with feeding the multitudes. You should be looking forward to sharing your home and good fortune with friends and family. But if you're panicking, take a moment to identify the cause. Is it the thought of choosing the menu? Being able to prepare enough dishes? Making a family favorite as well as grandma used to? Whatever your panic button is, identify a solution to the perceived problem right now. Perhaps you could ask a few people which dish they absolutely must have (they'll feel special that dishes were made "just for them"). Many dishes can be prepared ahead of time. Perhaps an aunt can bring that family favorite.

Whatever your solutions, find at least one possible solution for each problem you foresee. Now how do you feel? Better prepared and more relaxed?

Now, take another few moments to sketch out a time line for the event preparations. Start at the event and work backwards. A sample time line might look like this:

- Date of feast: Final preparations and feast!
- Day before feast: Last preparations – leave time for last-minute shopping for missed (or consumed) ingredients, fresh ingredients, and flowers.
- Week before feast: Shop for all ingredients. Make (or order) pre-prepared dishes. Decorate.
- Two weeks before feast: Purchase or make decorations. Check that you have all cookware and serving ware required, enough utensils, glasses, etc.
- Month before feast: confirm attendance of family and friends – check for special dietary restrictions. Plan and review supplies for decorations.
- Two months before feast (this week?): Send invitations and make menu. Make any dishes that must be made well ahead of time. (In New Zealand, we make Christmas pudding ideally six to ten weeks before Christmas, which lets all the flavors infuse. Mmmm.)

However you decide on the time line, the trick is to put simple steps into each of the time slots so that

you're not doing it all at once at the height of the hubbub. Enter the dates into your calendar to help yourself keep pace with your plan. And don't be afraid to ask for help. 'Tis the season for family and friends to come together and be cherished.

Good luck and Happy Holidays!