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Personalised Presents

Anything personalised usually goes down well, stationery for the new home owner who's too busy fixing the lights to find spare cash for the letterheads, for instance. A child's drawing – scribbles, spelling mistakes and all – can be printed on to a pillow-case at the Monogrammed Linen shop (www.monogrammedlinenshop.com). It's not cheap, starting at £200, but special. They will also transfer a name, a poem, a sweet message on to a cushion.

Anya Hindmarch (www.anyahindmarch.com) embellishes a handbag with a photograph of the owner's children, which makes a terrific present for the new (or even older) mother (from £75 to £215), as do the very chic bracelets made of gold cubes with letters spelling out the names of children or the nearest and dearest (www.felt-london.com). She's just started a new service making wallets, jewellery boxes, journals to special order, embellishing them with personal messages. Not cheap, but very special.

I remember the pleasure with which a very successful entrepreneur showed me the special Monopoly board his children had had made for him. Each station on the board had a personal reference to his home, his office, his friends or his family. They hadn't just gone into a shop and bought a standard model – they'd put thought and effort into it. This makes a great present. You can either order one complete from www.firebox.com (£79.95) or go for a Make Your Ownopoly set, which provides just the bare bones (£19.95 from www.handpickedcollection.com), and customise it yourself. You'll need, as the website warns, a free afternoon and a good printer.

Firebox has plenty of smaller personalised ideas – a puzzle, for instance, based on the recipient’s home area (£19.95). You provide the post-code. For £24.95 you can have the front page of any edition of *The Times* (choose a birthday or an anniversary) made into a puzzle.

Photographs and Paintings

As for our entrepreneur, he was just as thrilled by the present a great friend had made as a thank-you for a fiftieth birthday jaunt to St Petersburg – a personalised album filled with photographs, drawings, poems, sketches and anecdotes from the whole weekend. You could adapt this for Christmas for somebody you care about. Romaine Lowery of the Clutter Clinic (www.clutterclinic.co.uk) will do it for you if you can’t face it yourself. She charges £60 an hour if she comes to the house or £25 an hour for the work she does at home, and she’s a fountain of innovative ideas on what to do with photographs. She’ll sort the albums, have photographs blown up to make works of art (photographs of their children make great presents for new parents or doting grandparents), and have them printed on to sheets or blinds. If you prefer to do it yourself, Romaine Lowery’s book *The Clutter Clinic: Organize Your Home in 7 Days* has a whole section on what to do with photographs.

If you’re in digital mode, visit www.shutterfly.com, which will lead you by the hand, showing you exactly how to create your own albums.

A bit of lateral thinking, not to mention planning ahead, doesn’t come amiss – if not a photograph then a painting of

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a child, spouse, pet, or home is always special, although not cheap. You could consult the Royal Society of Portrait Painters (www.therp.co.uk) to find an artist.

Buying Time

The Practical Princess (www.practicalprincess.com) is a regular tidier-upper. For Tamara Mellon and PR supremo Tom Konig Oppenheimer, she sorts the office, the wardrobe, the drawers or anything else that needs doing. Half a day – or if you're feeling generous – a whole day (£450) of her time would be a fantastic present.

What my husband wants most of all is somebody to put his hundreds of books into some kind of order. If you know somebody like him, booking some of Romaine Lowery's time would be well received. This is just the sort of task the Clutter Clinic (www.clutterclinic.co.uk) relishes.

These days, Rachel Meddowes (www.rachelmeddowes.com) helps the disorganised, the ill, the unimaginative or the just plain busy get to grips with doing up their houses. For the right person, some of her time would not only be a lovely present but also a godsend.

- * Having a child's or a teenager's bedroom, or a grown-up's study, decorated is the sort of present nobody ever forgets.

Tickets

Tickets to Medium Rare (www.mediumrare.tv), a raunchy cabaret show, could be fun, but choose the recipients

carefully. Otherwise, tickets to a hard-to-get-into show, opera or concert are always a treat. Our daughter once gave us tickets to the Intelligence Squared debates at the Royal Geographical Society (www.intelligencesquared.com), which we loved, and a pony-mad child would love tickets to see the Lipizzaner ponies at Olympia. Vouchers (www.seetickets.com) give access to anything from a rock concert to jazz, tennis, football or a festival.

FLOWERS FOR CHRISTMAS

I've never known anyone at all not to love flowers. If you can't think of anything else, flowers make the most gorgeous present. A bunch of roses every week for a year is wildly romantic – www.realflowers.com will deliver them for about £420. The roses are from England, in season, and from Kenya the rest of the time.

On a Budget

There was a moment last Christmas when, judging by the newspaper columns filled with bright new recipes for chutney-making, it looked as if entire families were going to be exchanging jars of condiments come the big day. Now, lovely though the home-made version is (my son makes it every year and I love it), I somehow think a giant exchange of nothing but chutney across the land would somewhat dampen the proceedings in most of the houses I know. If

you're going to do home-made, I think you'll have to be a bit more imaginative.

If you can't buy a professional's time, you might think about giving it instead – my daughter-in-law has promised me two hours of techy-savvy skills (I hope to get my iPod rather better filled). You could do some gardening, sew on buttons – you get the picture.

Presents don't have to be expensive. The year we rented a house in the Scottish Highlands we decided nobody was to spend more than £15 on a present. I don't remember feeling remotely deprived. We were given divine little bottles of special oils, vinegars, packets of dried truffles, secondhand books, little antique finds from tucked-away shops. It can be done. It stops anybody feeling pressured and we found that we really enjoyed the challenge.

* Jasper Conran, when once asked about his attitude to Christmas present giving, said, 'My whole family is horribly discriminating. They don't mind whether a present is expensive or not, but it has to be unusual, interesting, and capture their imagination, which takes a lot more thinking about.' Imagine the pressure of trying to find something to please his father, Sir Terence Conran. Think on *that* and count your blessings.

Presents that upgrade on a few of life's essentials go down well – gorgeous coffee, a good virgin olive oil from an interesting Italian estate, fine soap (Prada had a beautiful boxed set for £24 last Christmas), a classy scented candle (Rigaud, Diptyque, Cire Trudon), a pair of soft gloves, a luxurious bath oil (Ren's Moroccan Rose Otto or Jo Wood's organic oils), a rare vinegar (raspberry, a fine Balsamic), a

spot-on cookery book, a fine scarf, a terrific pepper-grinder or pestle and mortar, or set of good knives. The difference between the bad and the best is often not extortionate in monetary terms but huge in terms of pleasure. Beware of the cheap versions – nasty soap, vulgar scented candles or rough gloves give no pleasure and are truly a waste of money.

* A secondhand book carefully chosen, makes a lovely present. My husband, for instance, tracked down three old books on the history of the region in France where our son has a farmhouse, and they gave very special pleasure. The books weren't expensive either. (www.abebooks.co.uk is a good source.)

My tactics when shopping for presents on a budget are to plan ahead so there's plenty of time, and to make shopping seem like fun instead of a stressful chore. It's when you run out of time and begin to panic that throwing money at the problem seems like the only option that it can begin to stir up feelings of resentment. So I try to do a bit of disciplined list-making (not something that comes naturally but needs must) – people to buy for, what sort of thing they might like and what shops to hit. I then clear the decks to give three Saturdays in a row to the campaign, but the key thing is that each and every shopping day is broken up by a very jolly lunch with whoever can be persuaded to join in – friends, husband, children. That may add to the cost of shopping, but I defy anybody, even Paula Radcliffe, to shop all day without a cheery hour or two spent with the feet up and a drink in hand.

Since I live in London, I allocate one day to Notting Hill

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and its quirky little boutiques, another to a couple of department stores and the final Saturday to trawling the antique shops in Camden Passage, where I've often found my most satisfactory presents. The strategy can be adopted for all sorts of other cities, and those who are better organised – and willing to forego lunch – could possibly do it all in one day.

The most perfect presents, of course, are those that are most appropriate to the recipient. In the end, it comes down to putting some love, thought and imagination into the matter, and it is easy to see that the right thing need not cost very much money.

Specially for Men

In the case of the men in our lives whose reluctance to lust after worldly commodities is endearing for most of the year but inconvenient come Christmas, we just have to think harder and deeper. I am married to the least consumer-minded man I know, so when he actually mentions something he'd like, I pay attention and leap to. The presents therefore tend to be few but rather expensive – a 1930s black lacquered desk from a Brussels antique shop (before that, he was using a trestle table from Habitat); antique library steps to reach the topmost bookshelves – he now has two sets in two different places and loves them both; antique cuff-links; a fantastic light for his desk or bedside table to help eyes that aren't as good as they used to be. Gew-gaws, trinkets, and all the cheaper, smaller gimmicky gadgets the mail-order brochures purvey as suitable presents for men interest him

not a jot, and I think he's not alone. Here are some more ideas for a special present.

- * **A VINTAGE WATCH:** if he needs a watch, keep an eye on the auction sales – the bargains to be found there are often fantastic. As a specialist source of vintage watches, it would be hard to beat Tom Bolt (www.thewatchguru.co.uk). Tom cruises all the auctions, buys the best vintage watches wherever he finds them, and if you have something specific in mind, he'll do the scouting for you.
- * **ARTWORK:** originals are tricky – that old problem of taste raises its awkward head – but for somebody interested in modern art it is worth looking at Counter Editions (www.counter Editions.com), who commission work from a roll-call of young British art stars. The limited editions at London's Serpentine Gallery (www.serpentinegallery.org/shopping) are often surprisingly good value – prices start at £100.
- * **GADGETS AND GIZMOS:** this is where precision really counts. The wrong laptop or mobile phone is not only a grievous disappointment but a waste of large sums of money. What many men would really love is a gift voucher for one of the top-end specialist stores, such as Cornflake (www.cornflake.co.uk) or Selfridges (www.selfridges.com), where the Ron Arad-designed electronics department is everything a gadget-minded man could wish for. There, experts will engage him in esoteric discussions on such matters as surround sound, VCR taping, plasma screens, home cinemas and all the newest home entertainment systems on the market.

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- * FOOTBALL SEASON TICKET: obtainable from the club in question, this would have to be an early present – the season starts in August.
- * CLOTHES: cashmere jumpers of the highest quality and utmost simplicity are usually loved by all the men I know. If you can afford a grand label, well and good, but if not, Marks & Spencer and Uniqlo sell them gratifyingly plain, and they are terrific value for money. Pyjamas with a bit of provenance have also been, as they say, ‘well received’ by the men in my life – some steely grey ones from Armani in a silky cotton were a particular success. Classy but modern ties, far from being a boring cop-out, are a useful standby. Richard James (www.richardjames.co.uk) is a good source.
- * KITCHENWARE: if you have a foodie to buy for, you’re in luck – firstly food itself is consumable and therefore needs constant replacing (great for present-givers) and secondly it takes time to acquire the full *batterie de cuisine* the ardent foodie requires. The secret here is never to buy cheap. As one young foodie I know put it, ‘I want the really good, plain classic things that are of high quality and I can’t afford myself. For instance, last Christmas I was given a wonderful frying pan – it never burns, never catches, I use it all the time. It probably cost about a hundred pounds but it’s a present to last a lifetime.’ High-quality saucepans (Le Pentole are beautifully engineered from heavy stainless steel), strong, sharp knives (Sabatier or the Japanese Global range – from Cucina Direct, www.cucinadirect.com) or a proper Le Creuset casserole

dish are good choices. For a chap who can't get going in the morning without a strong shot of caffeine, Gaggia make some of the best coffee machines around (see the House Party chapter for more on coffee machines). You could spend anything from £200 to £700 on a fine machine. Divertimenti (www.divertimenti.co.uk) has a good selection and will dispense useful advice.

- * WINE GLASSES: for the real wine buff there is only one glass to drink out of – the Riedel glass. They're absolutely plain, not the tiniest bit of decoration in sight, but what makes them special is that they are made of finest crystal, and every single glass is the result of serious study of the correlation between glass shape and the characteristics of the particular wine it is holding. Buy top of the range – the Sommelier collection – and start with the Burgundy Grand Cru or the Bordeaux Grand Cru. At £42.95 each they're not cheap but it solves present-giving for years – you can just gradually build up the collection. The Wedding Shop (www.weddingshop.com), Harrods (www.harrods.com) and really good glass shops sell them.

Specially for Women

Christmas makes me realise what a spoilt puss I am. 'What can we give you?' wail my nearest and dearest to no avail. Well, I don't need a lot, but there are things I'd love, and if I'd love them, I think that most probably so, too, would lots of other women.

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- * **BOOKS:** I love books that introduce me to ideas, or writers that I wouldn't have discovered on my own. I'm a sucker for reference books – particularly on design or art themes – and read them for pleasure. Membership (minimum £10) of the talking book club (www.travellerstales.co.uk) is a great idea. Tapes of anything from a terrific thriller to Anna Karenina can be bought or rented and played in the car or on holiday (not so heavy to carry around as the real thing).
- * **CDS:** a version of a special concert or by a favourite composer.
- * **HOMEWARE:** look for things that are individual and one-off and trawl the antique shops. Cushions from the Designers' Guild (www.designersguild.com) would perk up any room. Classic cable-knit throws in pure cashmere are not cheap but for those of us who live in draughty houses are an everyday luxury that really makes a difference. Although Zara Home has some lovely and cheaper alternatives (www.zarahome.com). Stylish Art-Deco-ish, hand-made mirrors, bevelled and properly joined with leading, would look great in any room. Find them at local antiques markets, plus Oka often has some pretty pieces (www.okadirect.com). Every year there seems to be a gadget of the moment – one year I remember longing for a floating radio, perfect for listening in the bath. Otherwise, something as simple as candles may be the answer, although they have to be beautifully scented or plain cream.
- * **STATIONERY:** since scribbling is my stock-in-trade, I can never have enough of those beautifully soft, moleskin-

wrapped notebooks of the sort that Ernest Hemingway and Bruce Chatwin never went anywhere without. Most stationery departments sell them at prices starting as low as £8 (www.moleskine.co.uk).

- * **FOOD:** a hamper filled with goodies (www.esperya.com) would be pretty nice to come down to on Christmas day – can't have the cook going hungry, can we?
- * **CLOTHES AND ACCESSORIES:** since women's wardrobes need updating it's good to look for ways of doing it that don't break the bank. Jigsaw (www.jigsaw-online.com) is perfect for cardigans that are just a little different, or for the jacket that is just the right shape and material for the season. Small boutiques, such as Musa where I once found a silk embroidered antique shawl and a brilliant crystal necklace with a beautiful old clasp, The Cross (www.thecrossshop.co.uk) and Mimi (www.mimiboutique.com) often have charming or witty little numbers that you won't find anywhere else. For fantastic antique watches on leather straps, pretty and witty accessories and jewellery, try Paul & Joe (www.paulandjoe.com). John Lewis (www.johnlewis.com) sells extremely tempting costume jewellery for about £30.
- * **FROM A SPECIAL SOURCE:** anything from www.re-foundobjects.com would be gorgeous – there's hardly a classier bath oil than Cote Bastides Fleurs d'Oranger and their crackle-glazed bowls and pitchers look as if they've come straight from a romantic old French farmhouse. I also love individual, one-off finds from antique shops.

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Some of my most successful presents have come from that source, from old lorgnettes to antique picture frames, wine glasses, jewellery, silver jugs and all the other singular and precious things that give pleasure.

Specially for Children

Parents will know what's really hot in any given year because their children will tell them, and if you are buying for other people's children, it's best to consult with the parents. If you can't think what to buy, don't forget treats – a visit to a theatre, a concert or a trip to a theme park all make great presents.



CHRISTMAS TREATS

If I could wave a magic wand, every child would get a free ticket to a pantomime each Christmas. They're the all-time Christmas treat. The bad news is you need to book early if you want a decent seat – and take it from me, where you sit matters if you don't want to miss a lot of the action. For information, visit www.pyramidpantomimes.com (touring pantomime company) and www.thisistheatre.com.

Everybody should try once in a lifetime to go to the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, which has been held on Christmas Eve at King's College Chapel, Cambridge since 1918. John Betjeman called the chapel 'the most beautiful building in Britain . . . a forest glade of old coloured glass and between the great windows columns of shafted stone shoot up and up to fountain out into a shower of exquisite

elaborate fan vaulting. It is the swansong of Perpendicular architecture, so immense, so vast, so superbly proportioned, so mysterious, that no one can enter it without gasping.' The combination of sublime architecture, the beauty of the music (it always starts with 'Once In Royal David's City' and every year there's a newly commissioned carol) and the purity of the boys' voices makes it an unforgettable experience. It's primarily designed for the people of the city of Cambridge but members of the public can start queuing at 1.30pm on Christmas Eve for some of the remaining seats. The service starts at 3pm and finishes at 4.30pm (www.kings.cam.ac.uk).



Small but lovely children's shops are tucked away all over the country, but if you don't know of one and don't fancy the nightmare that a visit to the big emporia usually entails, all you have to do is browse through numerous great websites, sit back and get everything sent to you.

- * www.hawkin.com is great for stocking fillers. It has a section called 'pocket money' where kids can go for inexpensive small presents, and there are splendidly quirky ideas, such as 'Adopt a reindeer', as well as party paraphernalia.
- * www.letterbox.co.uk has a wonderful selection of toys for all ages. They're not particularly cheap but it's worth paying a bit extra to make sure they don't fall apart.
- * English Heritage's online shop (www.english-heritageshop.org.uk) has a children's section. One of my grandsons is quite astonishingly interested in weaponry, so it provides a great source of presents for him.

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- * www.the-green-apple.co.uk has quirky ideas for presents for eco-conscious children – a rocket, doll's house and castle made from cardboard, for instance, as well as dominoes and skittles made from bamboo.
- * www.carouseltoyshop.co.uk sells all those little plastic figures that children love – pirates, fairy-tale characters, scary knights – individually as well as in groups.
- * www.pedlars.co.uk has some nice quirky ideas, including a remote-control plane for £19.50.
- * www.notonthehighstreet.com and www.handpickedcollection.com are two beautifully put-together sites that have great taste and are adept at uncovering interesting small companies.
- * Most museums have great shops. The Natural History Museum (www.nhmshop.co.uk), the Science Museum (www.sciencemuseumstore.com) and the British Museum (www.britishmuseumshoponline.org) are fantastic, full of dinosaur-related items, skeletons to put together, scientific experiments to do and wonderful books and puzzles. The actual shops are worth a visit, as well as browsing online.



PERSONAL SHOPPERS

Last Christmas, just as I was leaving Selfridges, bent at the knees having spent a whole Saturday there, I happened to glance into the personal shopping suite. There I saw a

beautifully edited collection of the best the store had to offer – I could have done it all in the comfort of the suite and made the personal shopper do all the work. If you've got a long list and want special things, it's a great way to shop, but it's not really on if you're merely looking for a bargain.



Gift Wrapping

You may be of the school of thought that thinks that wrapping up the pressies can be dealt with by using any old paper and sellotape minutes before Santa is expected down the chimney breast. Now if you've got a full house, with decorations to organise and stockings to fill, are cooking for twenty on the day and have a full-time job, then you're excused and perhaps the answer is to delegate. Some stores will do it, although not always automatically and it's usually mighty time-consuming involving long queues. More and more websites, though, are coming to the rescue.

- * www.notonthehighstreet.com not only sends everything out ready-wrapped in tissue paper with a label, but also sells the wherewithal to do your own wrapping, if you prefer to do that. It could be just some plain brown paper with white ribbon (black would be just as chic) and a wooden letter – a good way of identifying who the present is for at £3.60 a time.
- * If you're a slightly hopeless, out-of-touch godparent or grandparent, and aren't up to speed with children's tastes,

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www.wickeduncle.com lists children by age and suggests presents for them – these are then sent ready-wrapped with a hand-written message.

- * For techy, jokey, gadgety toys that boys love, www.firebox.com is the place and it will also send them ready-wrapped. Firebox offer six wrapping options and you may be surprised to learn that the third most popular of them is its Crap Wrap. Crap Wrap consists of the sort of botched old paper and sticky tape combo that looks as if it has been done in two minutes flat by somebody with zero artistic flair. 'This uniquely shoddy process,' it states clearly on the website (you only find this fabulous item once you've bought something and are checking out), 'may result in one or all of the following: product highly visible, evidence of nail scissor use, hair found on sellotape, rips and tears.' There you go.

Doing it Yourself

For those who like to make some kind of a personal effort and jazz up the wrapping – possibly to make more of the diminished present inside – here are a few ideas:

- * Do as Annabel Lewis, the owner of VV Rouleaux (www.vvrouleaux.com), does. She uses petal paper, left over after they've made their paper flowers, to wrap small presents, and it comes in heavenly colours (£2.95 a sheet).
- * For bows that hold their shape, always use wired ribbon, which is available in myriad colours, patterns and widths.

- * Save every scrap of spare, or at least not torn, paper and ribbon each Christmas in a war-chest. In there, you're bound to find enough material to make some wild rosettes – take one small scrap, fold it ends to centre, tie another over that and another and another to build up layers until the rosette looks crazily wonderful. You could also use the odds and ends to make a great stream of rag ribbon, and add butterflies, small birds or roses (all sold by VV Rouleaux).
- * For children's parcels, you could add pink mice, lollipops or candy sticks.
- * If you hate the idea of waste and are thinking eco, go to www.naturalcollection.com for recycled paper and tags (six sheets of paper and six tags for £2.25).
- * Choose a colour scheme (bottle green with a bottle green-based tartan ribbon is my choice). Newspaper can look quite creative tied up with black-and-white checked or striped ribbon. Colour code presents by keeping different ribbon for each person, or different tissue paper – either works a treat.
- * Best idea I've come across for treating something very small but precious, such as jewellery, is to take an unwanted hardbacked book and with a sharp knife cut a hole in the middle, slip the tissue-wrapped item into it and then wrap. Brilliant.
- * Theme the paper according to the present or the interests of the recipient. Wrap a foodie's present in paper with pictures of great dishes. If you're giving a travel book, wrap

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it in a road map. Otherwise, use several sheets of a favourite magazine taped together.

- * Empty coffee jars, cereal boxes or other containers can be conscripted for Christmas duties.
- * Little imaginative touches can make a difference. For instance, you could tie a miniature whisk to a kitcheny present, or a magnifying glass to an atlas.
- * Leaves, greenery, flowers, berries and pine cones all pretty up a present no end and make it look personalised.
- * Pieces of fabric are a wonderful substitute for paper, and if you also use some as a tie, the wrapping can look really individual. A scarf or a belt could also be used as a tie.
- * As for those elusive tags – it seems to be an immutable rule that they run out on Christmas Eve – make your own using cut-outs from old Christmas cards or pictures from magazines stuck to old labels or business cards.

* Counsel of perfection: do your wrapping by degrees. Deal with a few parcels at a time, as you watch *Newsnight*, or whatever else you fancy on TV.

The Table

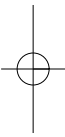
So, the house is looking great, the turkey (free range and organic) has been ordered, the tree's in place, the Christmas cards are written and posted – now you're

SAVING THE PLANET

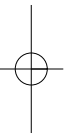
If you want to shop, wrap and generally celebrate Christmas without wasting resources, here are some ideas.

- * Keep away from traditional wrapping paper. This is a key commandment – buy recycled wrapping paper, or, better, re-use newspapers, comics, magazines, fabric remnants or brown paper bags. All can be prettied up with leaves, pine cones, stickers and children's candy (www.use-less-stuff.com has some good ideas).
- * Stockings made from Fair-trade cotton, and eco-friendly crackers, can be bought from www.biomelifestyle.com. This website is also a source of eco-friendly presents, such as recycled glass, bamboo coasters and Alpaca slippers.
- * John Lewis usually has crackers that are not only made from recyclable materials but a percentage of the profit goes to Save The Children.
- * For eco-friendly stocking fillers from ethical sources, visit www.adili.com, www.ecocentric.co.uk and www.traidcraftshop.co.uk.
- * Green Ribbon (www.greenribbon.org.uk) sells crackers, cards and wrapping paper made from natural or recycled materials while its biodegradable ribbons are made from wood pulp and are gorgeous.
- * Buy your tree from a sustainable source. Visit the British Christmas Tree Growers Association (www.bctga.co.uk) for advice.
- * Buy a potted Christmas tree, if you have somewhere to keep it, so that it can be re-used every year. If you buy a cut tree, make sure it can be turned into mulch. To recycle the tree – or anything else – visit www.recyclenow.com for advice.

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- * Baileys (www.baileyshomeandgarden.com) sell baubles for the tree made from recycled glass. Tree decorations become part of a family tradition, reminding everybody each year of the Christmases that have gone before, so buy them to last.
 - * Use solar-powered or LED lights on the tree – www.nigelsecostore.com sells them.
 - * Buy as much of your food as possible from local sources – www.thelfd.com has a list of small, local suppliers.
 - * Finally, don't buy jokey tat. Just don't. It's a waste of money.



wondering how to make the day itself special. Well, since most of the day usually centres round the table, that's where most of the effort should go, and there are as many ways of making the table look terrific as there are decorative styles.



COLOUR SCHEME: start by choosing a colour scheme. Focusing on just one colour always looks good. You could go for all white with perhaps some touches of silver and myriad lights – very Scandinavian. Tie-on chair covers in the same colour fabric are an added touch, or, failing that, you could tie matching ribbons to the sides of the chairs.

Another idea is to indulge in, say, a gold table. Gold-bedecked glasses that you might not normally dream of using look very celebratory at this time of year. Christmas, in my view, isn't the time for minimalist chic – it's for exuberance, extravagance and a bit of over-the-top kitsch. Talking of extravagance, Astier de Villatte gold-plated cutlery is available from the Designers' Guild ([www.designers guild.com](http://www.designersguild.com)) – £24 for

a knife, £17 for a fork and £17 for a spoon, but they could be brought out come party-time year after year.

TABLECLOTH: you may have a gorgeous table that doesn't need a cloth, but otherwise it's nice to have a special one for Christmas day. Antique shops and antique fairs often have old embroidered sheets that you could use, or you could buy a length of inexpensive fabric and make your own. If you have a really large table, and dream of it covered in a vast damask cloth, start saving. The Volga Linen company (www.volgalinen.co.uk) sells them in off-white or natural with a paisley self-pattern. The largest is 98½ x 216½in/ 250 x 550cm for £295 while the linen version comes in black or natural for £340.

The interior designer's trick of using two cloths – say, a coloured heavy one (or bedspread) underneath, topped by a shorter white or cream one – looks very grand. Take a trip to Southall, or any local Indian market, if you can. There you will find saris in almost every colour, gauzy and garish, silky and beautiful, with which to clad your tables for a fraction of the price that tablecloths command.

Runners down the table add a festive air – John Lewis have some terrific voile, satin and velvet table runners (£35) in rich red and gold. SIA (www.sia-homefashion.com), a Swedish company, also sells table runners, starting at £9.95, and they have a vast range of crystal candleholders and candelabras, and collectible baubles, too. The company has just one shop (in Wimbledon) but Selfridges, Harrods and John Lewis all stock its wares, and its website is filled with inspirational ideas that you could plunder.