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**FEATURES**

- [Interior Design](#)
- [Construction](#)
- [Personal Space](#)

**INSIDE**

- [From the Editor](#)
- [Entryway](#)
- [My Hudson Valley](#)
- [Metro Life](#)
- [Site Specific](#)
- [Area Spotlight](#)
- [In the Garden](#)
- [Farm Notes](#)
- [In the Kitchen](#)
- [Get It Done](#)
- [Home Style](#)
- [House Horoscopes](#)
- [Back Porch](#)

**RESOURCES**

- [Real Estate Listings](#)
- [Business Directory](#)



**ENLIGHTENED RITUALS**  
BY SUSAN HODARA, PHOTO BY ILLUMINATIONS.COM

For thousands of years, the drama of the winter solstice—that single December day when darkness matches daylight and the sun sits at its lowest point in the sky—has spawned ceremonies celebrating the rebirth of the sun and the cycles of nature. From the Roman Saturnalia to the Greek Sacaea, from the Iranian Yalda to the Egyptian Rekeh Ur and the Indian Sankranti, cultures spanning the globe have lit bonfires, burnt candles, shared feasts, and adorned their abodes with evergreens and other seasonal plants. Indeed, many of the traditions of Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and other present-day winter celebrations have their origins in these ancient rituals. In addition to decorating for the holidays, following are tips from local experts about how such rituals can be updated, personalized, and brought home to enjoy throughout the long season of darkness ahead.

Trees are a source of inspiration for Joan-Marie Gonzalez, co-owner of Fairground Attraction (914-241-4433), a gift and accessories shop in Mount Kisco. "Twigs are elegant when tied together with raffia and set on a coffee table, or simply arranged in a vase," Gonzalez says, noting that white birch is particularly popular in winter. The store carries what's called a branch-bunch pedestal—a cube of bound branches about seven inches tall. "It's perfect for a fat pillar candle," Gonzalez says. Another item, which Gonzalez says is easy to re-create, is a round planter surfaced with tree bark. "Fill it with river rocks and candles, and it becomes a fabulous centerpiece." She also suggests filling bowls with pinecones or reindeer moss.

Dried berries are key in the arrangements of Ursula Gebert, a floral designer at Matterhorn Nursery (845-354-5986; matterhornnursery.com) in Spring Valley. Among her preferences are tallow berries ("white and expensive," she says), snowberries ("pink and delicate"), and beauty berries ("vibrant bright purple"). In place of a wreath, she suggests hanging a small container: "Use a metal bucket, cachepot, or twiggy basket and fill it with sprigs of berries."

Howard Siegel, owner of Christopher's Antiques (845-358-9574), a home-décor store in Nyack, enjoys draping garlands of bittersweet or other berries around a chandelier, or shaping them into circles or coils to use as candleholders or napkin rings.

The first time Raychel Wengenroth (203-894-8826), a silversmith in Ridgefield, Conn., crafted a candelabra—a gift for her parents' 50th anniversary—she was captivated by the challenges and surprises it presented. "It holds five candles at varying heights, with 10 holes in each drip cup," she explains. "I thought it would cast 50 circles, but in fact the highest candle casts 50 circles, the next one casts 40, and so on." Candles produce not only light, but shadow and reflection. "When you're lighting candles, you have to consider that. They're more than just candles," she says.

Cathrine Parker, owner of Tallows End Candles (203-661-5903) in Greenwich, touts seasonal candles in ocher, burgundy, and sage, some in the shapes of gourds, pumpkins, and turkeys. Favorites include soy and beeswax varieties. "They're lead-free, smoke-free, and dripless, and you get a better burn," she says.

Many of Parker's customers request unscented candles that won't interfere with the fragrance of food and perfume. But, she says, "When you walk into a home, it's nice to be welcomed by a sweet smell." She's not talking spiced cider, however. "It must be high quality, perfumed rather than scented." Suitable options are French or English candles made by Rigaud, Slatkin, or Porthault.

Holiday dinners at the Parkers' are entirely candlelit, with the middle of the table devoted to the centerpiece. "I might pile fruits on a cake stand that's draped with garlands, and intersperse fall-colored

votives and larger candles," she says. "By the time you add linens, silverware, and the right glasses, it's a marvelous table!"

One suggestion from Claire Won Kang (914-241-9460; [clairekang@aol.com](mailto:clairekang@aol.com)), a floral designer in Chappaqua, is minimal yet dramatic—also inexpensive, uncomplicated, and easily modified to taste. It consists of several square glass vases lined up on a runner, each filled with water to a different level. Into each goes either a floating candle or a single stemless flower, and a drop of food coloring as desired. You can stop there, or surround the vases with gourds and colorful tree leaves.

A second suggestion is even simpler. "Gather all your candleholders and intermingle them in a wavy line on your table," she says. "Be sure to buy lead-free candles, and then have some fun!" Kang believes such projects should involve the next generation. "Let your children choose the colors," she urges. "Let them collect the leaves. Do it as a family, and let them feel part of the festivities." [↑](#)

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