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Get Organized: A holiday master plan

This year **WILL** be better because you **WILL** set goals and **WILL** follow through

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Does this recipe for the holiday season sound familiar?

"Start with unreasonably high expectations, heap on a good dose of guilt and a dash of procrastination, simmer it with family differences and distances, try to do too much and garnish with the flu bug."

That cooks up a huge helping of disaster.

Instead, try a new recipe this year for a much more satisfying holiday experience.

Goal setting

If you start with a clear vision of what you want from the holidays, you are more likely to get it. For starters, try goal setting.

Create a list of the holiday activities that give you pleasure. Determine which will be a big disappointment if you run out of time and can't get to all of them.

Next, prioritize your list and select the top three or four.

Then take each one and break it down into the tasks required to complete it.

Remember to be realistic about your time, budget and skills. I gave up holiday baking because I value decorating, throwing an open house and selecting the perfect gift for each person on my list.

Finding time

First, realize you can't do it all. Accept that there are things on your list that won't become reality. That's why I encourage prioritizing.

Determine who are the most important people in your life and commit to pleasing them first. (Your own name should be at the top of the list.)

Remember those tasks you listed in the goal-setting phase? Now is time to sit down with your family and delegate -- or better yet, let them choose the tasks they will take on. If you don't ask, you won't get any help!

If child care might get in the way of accomplishing your plans, you could trade baby-sitting with friends. Or hit the mall as a family -- one parent takes the kids in the morning, you meet for lunch, then switch the kids for the afternoon.

A major step for success: Decide not to accept guilt! Don't beat yourself up thinking you failed because you couldn't find or afford all the gifts your children asked for, or because you ran out of time to make the cranberry relish from scratch.

Eliminate storage snafus

If you haven't used some of your holiday decorations in the past three or four years, then you know what to do with them.

Now for what to do with what you keep.

Storage containers -- Make sure you have the proper storage containers so you don't end up with broken decorations. Many of the containers come color-coded for various holidays. There also are divided ornament containers and wreath boxes for simple storage solutions.



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Photograph each room when it's decorated. When you take the decorations down, put one room's items together in a storage bin and attach the photo so you know which room the bin goes to next year.

Lights -- Wrap lights around "light organizers" so you don't waste time next year untangling them. If you can't find ready-made organizers, try wrapping the strands around sturdy cardboard.



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Boxes and packing peanuts -- Do you hang on to these items so you can use them next year? Unless you have a lot of storage space -- and most of us don't -- you'll waste precious space storing boxes that are likely to get crushed later, or peanuts you have no place for.

Wrap lights around "light organizers" so you don't waste time next year untangling them.

Instead, start gathering these supplies a couple of months ahead of time and when the season is over, eliminate what you don't need. Places such as Mail Boxes Etc. or The UPS Store will gladly take the extra peanuts off your hands.

Holiday gift-wrap -- Store it in its own container in the area where you keep the holiday decorations. This frees up space elsewhere for all-purpose gift-wrap throughout the year. Storage containers for gift-wrap come in several different styles, from free-standing floor containers to under-the-bed containers and organizers that hang in a closet.



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Cards

Buying and writing holiday cards can be one of the more time-consuming tasks. To get a head start on next year, buy yours right after Christmas, when cards go on sale.

Divide the writing and sending into several components, such as:

- Affixing return address labels and postage.
- Addressing the envelopes, or using your computer to make labels and affixing.
- Writing the greetings. (If you send 50, write just five a day for 10 days and you'll be done in no time!)
- Planning ahead with that picture or letter you will include. If you're going to have a family portrait taken, schedule it now to avoid the long lines or the risk of not getting the photographer of your choice.

Here are some other tips:

- Find a container or basket to keep all the supplies needed for your cards, so you can easily take it with you. If you have a few minutes to write them while you wait to pick up children or before an appointment, you'll be surprised what you can accomplish.
- Traveling? Take a stack with you on the plane -- it's a great time to get them done and you'll be the envy of everyone else. Each year in October when I take my vacation, I have a long flight and I take them with me. By the time I'm off the plane, I am just about done!
- Computerize: Keep a list on the computer of those people you send cards to each year. An Excel file works well for this. And you can use the data to create address labels.
- Don't want to use the computer? Try dropping the envelopes from the cards you receive in a larger envelope or folder. When the next season rolls around, pull out the envelopes and address your cards according to the ones you've received.

To help with goal-setting, planning, storage and keeping track of who you will send cards and give gifts to, visit www.organizedchristmas.com

On their Web site you will find 45 free templates to help you get organized. Some of these include:

Holiday Plan -- Family Values Worksheet

Christmas Countdown 2007 Calendars

Christmas Card List

Decor Storage and Inventory

Room-by-Room Decor Planner

Holiday Menu Planner

Gift Idea Planner

Gift Closet Inventor

Shopping List

Stocking Stuffer List

Enjoy

No matter how you choose to spend your time this holiday season, I wish for you a season filled with peace and happiness -- and, most of all, free of chaos!

Laura Leist is president and founder of locally based Eliminate Chaos LLC. Her latest book is "Eliminate Chaos: The 10-Step Process to Organize Your Home & Life" (Sasquatch, 212 pages, \$19.95), available at bookstores or on her Web site, www.eliminatechaos.com She can be reached by e-mail: laura@eliminatechaos.com.