

The Empty-Nest Holidays

By Susan Camp

Last week, I spoke with a friend about Christmas and asked if her children would be home for the holidays. Her son graduated from college last spring and is currently living in another state, and her daughter moved out of Virginia, too, after graduating from college several years ago. She said they would both be home, and she and her husband are very excited. Our conversation prompted me to reminisce about past holidays that Jim and I have spent alone while our sons have been off to faraway places.

That first empty-nest holidays without the kids happens to all of us who have spent the major portion of our adult years preparing our children to venture forth on their own. It isn't easy when the time comes, and it isn't fun. In fact, the first Christmas alone can be depressing, and I feel for the moms and dads who have to face that reality unprepared.

Not expecting much of a response, I decided to Google "empty-nest Christmas ideas," and immediately received 708,000 hits. The results were reassuring; obviously, I wasn't the first person to research the topic.

So, for all the parents out there who are experiencing their first empty-nest Christmas and for those who are attempting to come up with fresh ideas for a quiet holiday, here are a few suggestions, some that Jim and I have tried and others from internet articles and blogs.

Change the way you decorate for the holidays, and decorate early. If you have used an artificial tree for years, buy a live one. There is nothing that smells like December more than a live evergreen. Yes, trees are expensive, but you can buy a smaller one. Put away the children's homemade decorations this year, and decorate the tree the way you always wanted to but didn't want to disappoint them. Maybe you always dreamed of a tree with white lights and silver stars, or you wanted to cover the tree with bird ornaments. Go for it!

Take a wreath-making class, or if you made your own wreaths until piano lessons and soccer practice usurped your free time, revive your old skills. Go out to the woods and find the greenery and berries you need to create the perfect wreath for your front door.

Take long walks on pleasant days, and pay attention to the changes you see. Are the hollies covered with red berries? Is there a surplus of hickory and beech nuts this year? Can you find some mistletoe low enough to harvest?

Gather pinecones and make peanut butter and birdseed feeders to hang in the yard. The squirrels will raid them, but they will make you laugh. For the insect-eating birds, find a recipe for homemade suet using beef fat, peanut butter, and cornmeal to attract cardinals, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, and woodpeckers. Dust off your binoculars and watch while the birds enjoy their tasty treats.

Try new recipes and establish new baking traditions. Bake bread together, and eat it fresh from the oven with lots of butter and soup that you cooked from last summer's vegetables that you

canned or froze. Make chocolate truffles and caramel sauce. Invite friends over for cookies and eggnog. Don't worry too much about the calories until January.

Go to local tree lightings, Christmas parades, markets, and craft fairs. Shop locally, not online. Buy presents for your gardening friends: paperwhites, amaryllis, tiny Norfolk Island pines, and shiny, new gardening tools.

Visit friends who may be alone for the holidays. Take them a plate of cookies or homemade fudge. Volunteer in the community.

Attend a Christmas concert or a production of "The Nutcracker." Spend a weekend at a mountain lodge—you might see snow! Spend a weekend in Richmond or Washington to view the city lights and holiday decorations.

If you prefer to avoid the traffic, stay home, light a fire, watch old movies, listen to Christmas music, and get to know each other again.