

# Is holly, jolly decor on listings OK during the holidays? | Home & Living

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**Q. We're putting our house on the market this month, and we're torn: Should we or shouldn't we put up Christmas decorations? I know stagers say to go clean, spare and neutral. But this is still our home, and it's not the holidays without a tree and all the trimmings. Your opinion?**

**A.** Would Aunt Mary's Nativity scene sprawled out onto a quarter of the living room floor deter a potential buyer? Should you put out every decoration just because it's what you've always done? Here are a few insights on how to best stage your home for sale during the holidays:

**n Clean thoroughly, then stage.** It's already hard enough to keep your home clean, let alone add extra holiday items in the mix. Take the time to do a deep clean on the house. Then, pick out a minimal amount of neutral decor. You'll want to select items that are not personalized. Keep things with your photos, names and even religious items in storage. Pairing seasonal decorations to your home's color palette is the key.

**n Complement your home's features.** If your living room has a gorgeous fireplace, don't dominate the space with a huge Christmas tree loaded with the last 17 years' worth of ornaments your kids have made. Try subtle-yet-festive things, such as offering cookies paired with holiday cocktail napkins, a jar of mini candy canes on the foyer table, a 4-foot tree with a handful of color-themed ornaments. There are plenty of ways to keep things in the holiday spirit and allow potential buyers to take in the wonderful features your home has to offer.

**n Safety is key.** It's exciting to see a large pile of presents under the tree as we approach the holidays, but it's just not a good idea to leave yourself vulnerable. Lock up your gifts in a closet, or put them in the trunk of your car during an open house. In addition, you don't want to create less walking space or have unnecessary obstacles for potential buyers.

The goal for sellers is to maintain an attractive and moderately festive home that can be seen at a moment's notice. The buyer will want to be able to visualize their furniture and belongings in the home, and being overwhelmed by a plethora of decor will make that nearly impossible.

– **Suzie Harris**, member of the Hampton Roads Realtors Association and a Realtor with RE/MAX Central Realty, Virginia Beach

**Q. We have worked long and hard on our garden for 25 years. It is a botanical marvel, with many unusual perennials. If we move to downsize, can we sell only to someone who will promise to take care of the garden?**

**A.** In a word, no. I am unaware of any legal requirement for a new property owner to

maintain a property's landscaping beyond a bare minimum.

Most municipalities have ordinances requiring property owners to mow their lawns and keep the landscaping tidy. To require a new property owner to maintain the landscaping to some external party's high standard is an undue burden on the new owner, I'd say. In order to attract a buyer with the same love of gardening that you have, perhaps your Realtor can emphasize the beautiful landscaping and make it a key selling feature of the home.

Beyond that, though, there is very little you can do to compel the new owners to do more than weed and mow.

– **Jeremy Caleb Johnson**, *Long & Foster, Realtors, and Christie's International Real Estate; At-Large Director, Hampton Roads Realtors Association and 2017 HRRA Realtor of the Year*

**Q. My mom says animals are a no-no when prospective buyers come to see our house. Is it necessary for pets to be out of the home during a showing? Are there alternatives to taking them out of the house?**

**A.** It is not necessary for pets to be out of the home during a showing. Years ago, the belief was that pets (and any sign of them) should be gone when a prospective buyer looked at a house, but that is not the reality of today. Currently, most people have pets and consider them to be part of the family. This is supported by recent data from the American Pet Products Association, which shows that the total amount spent on pets by Americans has grown from \$17 billion in 1994 to almost \$63 billion in 2016. Instead of pets being a hindrance when buyers look at a house, their presence can make a house feel more like home.

When I take photos of a listing I am about to launch, if I catch the family pet peacefully resting in the den, I make sure to include that image. Nothing looks more cozy and inviting than the family dog or cat on a rug by the fireplace. I have had prospective buyers with pets tell me they chose to see the house because it looked welcoming to their four-legged family members.

When showings occur, it is important that the house be odor-free. Make sure the litter box is freshly changed. Keep pets and their bedding clean. It is also vital that buyers can move about freely, but precautions must be taken so pets don't escape the house during showings. One option is to put the family dog or cat in his/her crate. Some pets love their crates and this works well for them.

Another option is to put them in a small room with a baby gate. It allows potential buyers to look into the room but also confines the pets. I normally put a note on the door frame of the room that says something like this: "Hello, my name is Sophie. I am very friendly, so feel free to come in my room and look around, but be sure the baby gate is closed when you leave."

Homeowners with pets want them to be comfortable, and creative solutions can be incorporated to make sure that the home-selling process is stress-free for people and their pets.

– **Debra Griggs**, *member of the Hampton Roads Realtors Association and Realtor*

*with RE/MAX Ambassadors, Norfolk*

**Q. I've owned my house for 15 years and am halfway into a 30-year mortgage. I like the neighborhood but am cramped for space. I'm into woodworking, but the house doesn't have a garage, so I use the room that should be my den as my hobby space. Would it be better for me to add on or find a larger house with a garage? How much value could a garage addition add?**

**A.** A lot can happen in 15 years. After such a long time in one place it's not unusual for a home that was once the "perfect fit" to no longer meet one's lifestyle needs. In fact, a study by the National Association of Realtors earlier this year found that the median home owner stayed in their home only nine years.

The addition of a detached garage can provide shelter for vehicles, and it is also a great place for a workshop. It can add to the value of your home, which can increase your equity and boost your return on investment when selling the property. But, depending on the specific neighborhood and because sellers often recoup only 60 to 70 percent of renovation/addition costs, it may actually make more sense to sell your current residence and find a different home that will better suit your current needs and lifestyle.

So, before calling a contractor or getting a building permit, you should always get customized information from a Realtor about how the addition of a detached garage may affect your property's value. Ask him or her to back up their suggestions with actual examples of homes recently sold. Look at the data first so you can make the best decision. That way you're not the one who pays for a misguided approach to increasing equity.

– **Ryan C. Benton**, *member of the Hampton Roads Realtors Association and Realtor with Rose & Womble Realty, Chesapeake*

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