

Holiday Decorating to Raise Your Spirits

To offset COVID-19, people are going all out on colored lights, glittering ornaments, garland and more

by Melissa Locker, AARP, November 25, 2020



Courtesy Paul Jeromack

Holiday decorating makes Paul Jeromack feel happier.

Paul Jeromack loves Christmas. So when he quarantined in early March and faced a long, lonely spring, Jeromack knew what he had to do: He put up Christmas lights.

String lights brighten his dining room windows, blinking lights with star reflectors cast a glow in his bedroom, and plastic light-up Santa Claus statues dot his apartment. More glittery, shiny ornaments are unpacked nearly every day.

Jeromack, a 60-year-old art dealer from New York City, was not alone in his decision to put up holiday decorations early this year. Many people are trying to push back against news of the pandemic, economic downturn and political upheaval by going all out on indoor and outdoor decorations, stringing colored lights, putting out pumpkins, garlands and wreaths.

“We all are looking for a sense of connection to other people after feeling the effects of lockdowns and isolation,” says Suzanne Degges-White, chair of counseling and higher education

at Northern Illinois University. “Holiday decorating — which is typically the lighting of lights in the dark winter — is totally needed this year.”

Decorations that make people smile

While Jeromack found a bit of happiness by getting ready for Christmas in March, Nancy McDowall-Dunford, 52, turned to something far creepier — a mad scientist laboratory and assorted ghouls and ghosts.

Back in April when Windsor, Ontario, was deep in the throes of its own lockdown, McDowall-Dunford and her husband, Todd Dunford, had a conversation about Halloween.

For years, the couple had transformed their farmhouse into a house of horrors, complete with a haunted maze and all sorts of thrills and chills to scare the public.

During the pandemic, they weren’t sure whether to move forward with those plans. But after talking with her husband, McDowall-Dunford decided to decorate with gusto — for her own mental health and that of those in her community.

“You’ve got to have something to look forward to, something that makes you happy, that makes you smile, and makes you feel giddy,” she says. “You’ve just gotta have that!”



Courtesy of Nancy McDowall-Dunford

In the early days of August, the couple put up Halloween decorations. On Halloween, McDowall-Dunford sat outside in a mask to make sure visitors abided by local social distancing rules.

The couple even came up with new signs for the haunted house. “We have one that says ‘Mask It or Casket’ and another that says ‘Six Feet Apart or Six Feet Under,’ ” she says.

Two weeks before Thanksgiving, Jamie Hickey, 50, decided to take advantage of some unseasonably warm Philadelphia weather to decorate his entire house, inside and out, including a blow-up sled with reindeer, Frosty the Snowman and Mickey Mouse dressed as an elf taking up residence on his front lawn. While the decision was partially motivated by not wanting to hang lights in 30-degree temperatures, he also was desperate for a way to make his kids happy.

“There is a rumor that they will be going back to full-time virtual school and they were upset, so I knew bringing out the Christmas decorations would cheer them up,” he explains. “It also doesn’t hurt giving your neighbors a reason to have a good laugh since we are definitely living in uncertain times.”

Psychological boosts to brighten the days

McDowall-Dunford’s decision to continue with her Halloween traditions despite the pandemic, and Jeromack’s and Hickey’s Christmas displays may very well have psychological benefits.

“[Decorating] is sharing a ritual and fostering a sense of communion and community,” says Degges-White, who has written about holiday decorating for *Psychology Today*.

While the holidays will undoubtedly look different this year, taking the time to put up glittering ornaments, set your table with holiday linens or finally buy that life-size nutcracker for your living room can help people feel more connected.

Whatever the psychological underpinnings that led to his decision to decorate for Christmas in March, Jeromack is glad that he did it. “It definitely gave me a boost,” he says. “Whatever people can do to brighten up these dark days is wonderful.”

He is planning on putting up a Christmas tree very, very soon.