

Recipes, crafts,  
homemaking ideas,  
and more!

# HOME for the *Holidays* 2012

**5 Minutes for Mom.com**<sup>TM</sup>  
bringing moms together

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## Let's Get Ready for Christmas Together

Can you feel the magic of the season beginning? It's time for us to get started with our holiday preparations.

There are family visits to schedule, dinners to prepare, homes to organize, and all the while — we have to find a way to get some much needed down time in there.

That is the reason for this wonderful e-book we have put together for you. Home for the Holidays 2012 is a magazine style e-book that you can read to find encouragement, get recipe inspiration, and fun craft ideas for you and your family.

The Homes for the Holidays e-book is for YOU mom. Take a break from your busy holiday planning, grab a delicious cup of coffee, and relax and enjoy all the stories shared here.

Inside the pages you will find recipes like pilgrim hats, yummy green bean bundles, hash brown casserole and more. You can read encouraging stories like learning to slow down at Christmas, finding time to serve others, and preparing your home for the holidays. Fun craft ideas include decorating your mantle and more.

Bloggers from all over have come together to make your holiday special! We hope that you enjoy this first edition. Please feel free to share this free resource with all of your online friends and family.

*Happy Holidays from our homes to yours.*



*Janice and Susan*



## Oh Christmas Tree

It's been about three years since we've had a real tree in the house, so the kids and I were very excited about this endeavor - T not so much, but he played along with just a little bit of Scrooge-like grumbling!.

There are lots of good things about trimming the tree, especially when it is real, like the nice, fresh Evergreen smell, or the pretty and green, but not-so-perfect branches.



There are lots of good things about trimming the tree, especially when it is real, like the nice, fresh Evergreen smell, or the pretty and green, but not-so-perfect branches.

But my favorite part of decorating the tree is unpacking all of the ornaments, and remembering the stories that they tell. "My ornaments have lots of wheels," exclaimed A excitedly, who does have a wide collection of planes, trains, and automobiles. A's collection of ornaments that "go" are among the hundreds and hundreds of ornaments in our vast array of Christmas decor.

## HOME for the Holidays 2012

We have so many ornaments that we barely cannot squeeze them all onto the tree, and that's a good thing, and here's why:



- **Merriment:** Many of our ornaments reflect the many interests and activities that bring us joy, happiness, and inspiration such T's collection of bicycle ornaments, A's soccer ball ornaments, Miss A's ornaments that feature polar bears and penguins, or my huge collection of snowmen/women ornaments - most of which could not fit onto the tree so they were designated to the garland on the stair railings, well, except for one of my favorite's from T ~ a Christopher Radko glass snowman that is holding a string of hearts.
- **Memories:** Like I said, each ornament has a story to tell. We have ornaments from our honeymoon trip to Maui including a colorfully painted starfish Santa (which btw the kids think is stinky, so they won't hang it up), and a small bride and groom that says "Just Maui'ed". I have many ornaments from my childhood including a little plastic sheep given to me at religious education classes, while T has a snowman shaped like a bell that he chose at Marshall Field's downtown when he was a boy. We have a variety of ornaments given to us by others as souvenirs from their travels, and we have a shiny Mickey ornament from our family trip to Disney World in 2007

- **Milestones:** Many of our ornaments mark important events in our lives such as Our First Christmas ornament from 1995. Both kids have their Baby's First Christmas ornaments from 2000 and 2002, respectively. We also have two very special handmade ornaments, one with Miss O's tiny baby footprint, and a small felt replica of A's hand. Every year, they match up their hands or feet to see how much they've grown over time. We have a New Home ornament from 2003 - the first year in our humble Yorkville abode. I also cherish many ornaments from my past life as an elementary school teacher. One of my favorite's is a small felt mouse with a mini-chalkboard given to me by my former colleague and good friend Kate.

*Sue is a stay at home mom who lives with her husband, two children, and a den of dust bunnies in a far western suburb of Chicago. A former elementary school teacher, newspaper reporter, and healthy mother, she loves to write, cuddle up with a good book, and spend quality time with her family and friends. Sue sometimes drives her kids to school in her PJs and slippers. She enjoys eating guacamole and chocolate, but not in the same bite. She is living with, and trying to live beyond, a complicated autoimmune disease called Scleroderma. Despite her daily challenges, she tries to look at the positive side of life. She collaborates with a good friend at the blog <http://2friends3things1blog.blogspot.com> and writes her own stuff at <http://lemomade.blogspot.com>. Follow Sue on Pinterest at <http://pinterest.com/smborowiak/> or Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/#!/LeMOMade>.*

## Nut Crescents



T is for Tradition, T rhymes with C, and C is for COOKIE, in this case nut crescent cookies. Nut crescents are one of the favorites in my family's Christmas cookie jar. This buttery, nutty, cookie joins dozens of other seasonal treats like sugar cookies, chocolate chippers, jam thumbprints, and many more delights.

Nut crescents are a popular holiday sweet in our house not only because they are tasty, but because they are a traditional Slovenian recipe baked by my grandmother, my mother, and now by me, my sisters, and my children. Cookie baking is a holiday custom for many cultures around the world, and most families have a recipe that is passed down from one generation to the next.

During the season of good cheer, my sisters and I will don our aprons and rock the kitchen with dozens of yummy goodies with the help of two little elves. Our Christmas sweet table would not be complete without our beloved nut crescents. Nut crescents are a fun cookie to make with kids because the dough must be shaped by hand. Most kids I know love to "play" with dough! The crescents also serve as a reminder of our family's heritage and customs. It is my hope that holiday cookie baking will be passed down from my children to





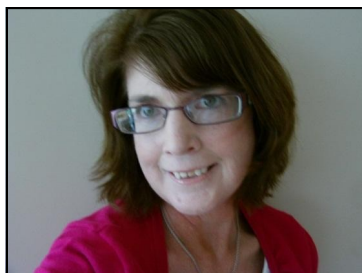
future generations in our family. If you would like to add a new variety to your cookie repertoire, try making this recipe this holiday season.

- \* 2 cups flour
- \* 1 teaspoon vanilla
- \* 6 tablespoons powdered sugar
- \* 1 cup butter
- \* ½ teaspoon salt
- \* 1 cup ground walnuts

Combine flour and salt. Cream butter and add sugar and vanilla. Add flour slowly and mix. Gradually mix in the nuts until well blended. Chill dough. Roll dough into pencil-like strips about 2-1/2 inches long and shape into crescents. Place on a greased cookie sheet and bake at 350 degrees for 10 to 15 minutes. Cool cookies, and then dust with powdered sugar.

*Recipe courtesy of the cookbook, Treasured Slovenian and International Recipes, The Progressive Slovene Women of America, Fourth Edition, 1995.*

A tip: This is a delicate cookie especially if you make the strips too thin. They may break while handling or transporting. However, they are just as tasty in pieces especially with a really good cup of coffee.



*Sue is a stay at home mom who lives with her husband, two children, and a den of dust bunnies in a far western suburb of Chicago. A former elementary school teacher, newspaper reporter, and healthy mother, she loves to write, cuddle up with a good book, and spend quality time with her family and friends. Sue sometimes drives her kids to school in her PJs and slippers. She enjoys eating guacamole and chocolate, but not in the same bite. She is living with, and trying to live beyond, a complicated autoimmune disease called Scleroderma. Despite her daily challenges, she tries to look at the positive side of life.*

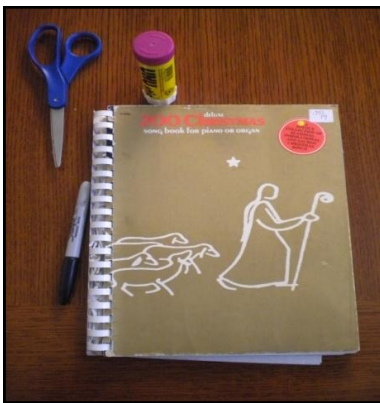
*She collaborates with a good friend at the blog <http://2friends3things1blog.blogspot.com> and writes her own stuff at <http://lemomade.blogspot.com>. Follow Sue on Pinterest at <http://pinterest.com/smborowiak/> or Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/#!/LeMOMade>.*

## How to Create a Holiday Wreath



This year I find I am inspired by all the wreaths that I have seen that are made of recycled materials. If you do an internet search, you may just be overwhelmed with all the different styles and colors. You can make a wreath for just about any season or reason, but I wanted to make one with my son this year for the holidays. You can see our finished product above. You too can make this wreath with your children. It is easy and fun.

### Gather Your Materials:



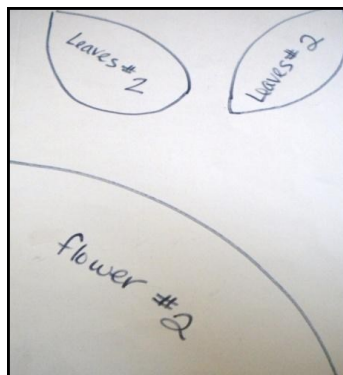
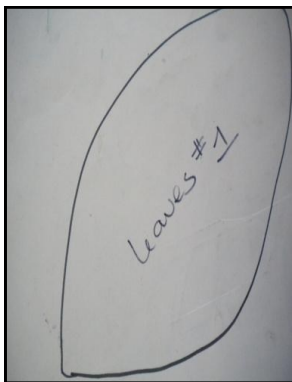
- Scissors and glue sticks
- Permanent marker
- Books or magazines intended for recycling
- Templates for leaves
- Cardstock or manila folder
- Wire Hanger (not the pants kind)

## Instructions

**Step One:** Bend your wire coat hanger into a circle. You can choose to leave the normal hook as a hanger for your wreath or you can choose to undo the hook as I have done.



**Step Two:** Trace and cut out your templates with a permanent marker on your cardstock.



**Step Three:** Start removing pages from the book or magazines. Your kids can help you with this portion. If they are older, have them trace the leaves so that you can cut them as they get them traced.

**Step Four:** Assembly of the first row of leaves. Take your leaves and lay them out under your wire hanger and arrange them to your liking.

**Step Five:** Start gluing your leaves around the wire frame. Fold the leaves from back to the front to create your base layer.

**Step Six:** Repeat step five but this time the leaves lay on top of the first row and fold around to the back.

**Step Seven:** Repeat to desired fullness. (I chose to do three layers of leaves)

**Step Eight:** Make the paper flowers. You are cutting out a spiral from a piece of your book or magazine paper. You can cut the edges rounded or straight just don't make it too thin or you will have a hard time rolling it. Start in the center of your spiral and roll the spiral into a small cone shape. Use your glue to hold the cone shape together. As you continue rolling the spiral around the center, glue it every so often so the flower stays together.



**Step Nine:** Attaching the flowers. Glue the base of each flower to the original layers of leaves. If you have any gaps, just cut out some smaller leaf shapes to fill in. Let your wreath dry somewhere it will not be disturbed for twenty-four hours. Then, the next day you can simply glue anything that has popped up so that your wreath is now ready to hang wherever you need a little festive holiday spirit.



*Paige Bacon is an artist, art educator, mom, cook, book lover, pet parent, runner, and backpacker. I can be found online at <http://briarroseartstudio.blogspot.com> , <http://pinterest.com/scottishroseart/>, and <http://scottishroseartstudiollc.tumblr.com>*



## Did You Know

As a child, Christmas Eve meant a busy day of cooking, a 30-minute drive to Grandma and Grandpa's house, and an evening of food, cousins, carols, and a very entertaining white elephant gift exchange. Christmas Eve was the best day of the year. Much more exciting than Christmas Day.

I knew things would change once I got married, but I didn't know how much they'd change. Thirteen years ago today, I was in the hospital, holding my newborn daughter, my first child. That day, and every Christmas Eve since, I have thought about Mary and what that first Christmas must have been like for her.

On this day that we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior, I commemorate the beginning of a new life for me. Not only is Christmas Eve the birthday of my oldest daughter, but it is the birthday of my life as a mother.

I have often pondered on the great responsibilities and the incredible privilege of being a mother. What an honor it is to raise God's children and to participate in the miracle of His creation.

So much has changed since that day in 1996 when I held my newborn baby in my arms. That day, I was filled with love. I couldn't comprehend the love that I felt for that little girl. But I was also overwhelmed by the responsibility placed in my hands that day. How was I going to do this?

What did I know about being a mother? Again, my thoughts turned to Mary and what she must have been thinking that day. She had been visited by an angel and knew from the beginning of her pregnancy that her child was no ordinary child. But how could she have understood in those early days? Even with the angelic preparation, how could she—a young girl with no experience being a mother or even a wife—prepare for the feeling of holding her son for the first time?



One of the kids' favorite Christmas songs is *Mary, Did You Know?* (by Mark Lowry) My kids apparently really like it. Here are the words:

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*Mary did you know that your baby boy will one day walk on water?  
Mary did you know that your baby boy will save our sons and daughters?  
Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new?  
This child that you've delivered, will soon deliver you.*

*Mary did you know that your baby boy will give sight to a blind man?  
Mary did you know that your baby boy will calm a storm with his hand?  
Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod?  
And when you kiss your little baby, you have kissed the face of God.*

*The blind will see, the deaf will hear and the dead will live again.  
The lame will leap, the dumb will speak, the praises of the lamb.  
Mary did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?  
Mary did you know that your baby boy will one day rule the nations?  
Did you know that your baby boy is heaven's perfect Lamb?  
This sleeping child you're holding is the Great I Am.*

I don't think Mary could have fully comprehended what was in store for her son or how his life would effect all mankind. Do we, over 2000 years later, fully appreciate what his life means to us? I can't know what was going through Mary's mind that night, but I know her heart must have been very full. Her son had come to earth to be our Savior, but he was her baby first.



Laura (Lolli) Franklin is a mother of five in the Washington D.C. area. Luckily, 16 years of being a mom has prepared her to keep her plate full, and she is doing just that today as a natural light photographer, author of the blog [Better in Bulk](http://www.betterinbulk.com), and a virtual assistant for other bloggers. Her daily life consists of a little bit of everything: food, photography, finances, shopping, books, music....and her blog reflects that. You can find Lolli on Twitter @1momof5 (<http://twitter.com/1momof5>) or on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/BetterinBulk>).

## Minty Pretzel Bites

One of my favorite things to do around the holidays is to make a bunch of holiday treats to give to pretty much everyone I know. It makes me feel like a little elf to spend an afternoon in my kitchen, making goodies and packaging them up all cute. While I've made several different types of treats over the years, a couple have been in the rotation on a regular basis because of the raves they get.

Today's treat is Minty Pretzel Bites. The key here is mint—it gives these a little extra holiday flare!

This recipe makes me incredibly happy because it incorporates 2 seasonal items:

Hershey's Peppermint Kisses and Holiday M&M's.



### Minty Pretzel Bites

*Makes about 60 treats*

- 1 bag mini pretzels
- 1 bag Hershey's Candy Cane Kisses
- 1 bag mint M&Ms

Preheat the oven to 170\*. Line a baking sheet with a silpat or parchment paper. Lay out your pretzels salty side up.



Then, unwrap all the kisses, and place one on top of each pretzel. Put the pretzels in the oven for 4-6 minutes. You want the kisses to get melty so you can press an M&M onto them, but not so melty that they go everywhere. While that happens, separate out your M&Ms by color.

When the kisses are melty but not too melty, take them out and gently press an M&M (M side down) on to each kiss. I like to alternate to make sure I have an even number of green and red treats. The white M&Ms are reserved exclusively for keeping my strength up while making treats.

Let them set up for at least 2 hours, until the chocolate has set. You could probably put them in the fridge to speed things up. Or you could just eat the rest of the M&Ms and watch Love Actually while that happens.

I love to buy a little jar from the dollar store and gift these to teachers and friends.



*Melissa Woodson is the community manager for Washington University in St. Louis' @WashULaw, a top-tier [Master of Law](#) program in U.S. law, as well as a contributor to the [LLM guide](#). In her spare time, she enjoys running, cooking, and making half-baked attempts at training her dog. Her personal blog may be found at [hungryhealthymj.com](#).*



## Journal Your Christmas



I am thrilled to begin my December Daily album. I began journaling my way through the Christmas holidays when my son was born so I would remember every moment. A few years ago I decided to make a scrapbook for the entire month and discovered that others had the same idea. What a treat to see what other scrapbookers come up with for their December Daily Scrapbook.

I couldn't be more excited to begin this December and this year my girls have decided, they would like to create a December Daily journal as well. I really look forward to this craft project all year long.

Journal Your Christmas is a scrapbook that details your entire month of December of that particular year. This is a wonderful way to document the silly season up to Christmas all compiled in a journal with photos and words/journaling. The basic idea is to create the pages before December 1st even appears on your doorstep so you can experience the wonderfulness of each December day as it occurs AND photograph it before the sun sets.

Simply begin on December 1st and end either at the end of the month, Christmas Day or the end of Three King's Celebration, which is the last day of the Christmas season (the end of the 12 days of Christmas). I usually journal a couple of days in the new year.

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In the past, I have created different books for each December creating whatever struck me on that day, but this year I have purchased a new binder that I am particularly fond of from Teresa Collins. I will use her line of Christmas Cottage scrapbook paper, supplies, card stock, chipboard, and loads and loads of embellishments. I have a huge stash of holiday supplies on hand from previous years that I will be dipping into as well. I have already begun my pre-labeling of days! I will also be using page protectors, envelopes, and pocket pages that I create from Teresa Collins gorgeous holiday paper.

Some things to gather during the month of December to add to your Christmas: Journal:

- Photos
- Receipts
- Scripture
- wrapping paper
- sketches/doodles
- print-outs of emails received and sent
- pictures my children create
- letters to Santa
- play programs
- service handouts
- cards and notes



Sometimes thinking of something to journal and document about each and every day can be difficult so here are some ideas to get your creative mind set to work. I like to take photos of the weather (we have fabulous snowy days here in the Midwest), Christmas card out takes, Advent, Visiting Santa, our yearly trip to The Walnut Room, Assisting with the Outreach Center at our church, Holidays sights in the city, Chriskindle Market in the city, Wrapping Paper and presents, the lighting of the Christmas tree, FOOD . . . oh, glorious food, documenting the many visitors throughout the holiday month, Letters to Santa, Cookie making and hanging of the stocking. As well as journaling about traditions, old and new, our perfect Christmas dreams and Christmas

music.

Each day in December has its own challenges so I never know how much time I will have to commit to journaling, creating and photo taking. The wonderful aspect about Journal Your Christmas is that you can spend as much time on a page as you like or as little time as you like. There is no pressure to make your pages exactly the same. I like to keep it flexible in case I change my mind and want to use something I have created on another page instead of the one I had originally planned. No pressure! Personal, FUN and stress-free! And Gorgeous! I can't wait to see how gorgeous this will be December 31st! Please consider a Journal Your Christmas this year and start gathering your supplies now!

# Don't Let the Holidays Cause Chaos in Your Marriage

Three years ago was the worst time ever in our lives financially. Our business was failing, our income was non-existent and the holidays were approaching fast. To make matters worse, this was the fifth or sixth year we had gone through this at this time of year—only this year it was at its worse.

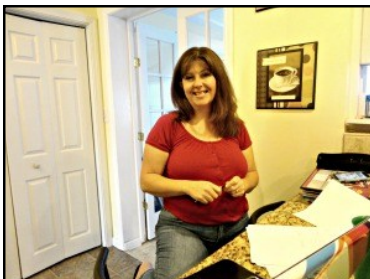
*No decorations were hung outside. No shopping for Christmas presents. Our Christmas tree sat in the living room with no presents underneath.*

However, **I was at my most peaceful I had ever been.** It was funny how even though everything around us was falling apart, our faith in God was at its strongest. The peace that only comes from Him was at its fullest. Stephen and I had made a commitment to each other earlier that year that no matter how bad things got, we would stick together. We would find ways to uplift and encourage one another during this hard time.

I think the hardest thing for me was telling the kids that there would be no presents that year. I figured they would cry and fuss and throw a fit. **They surprised me.** They pitched in and helped out in any way they could. It was amazing how everyone came together during the roughest year of our lives.

I tell you all that to say this—***Don't let the holidays ruin your marriage.*** So many families this time of year fall apart due to financial difficulties, bills, and ideas of what Christmas should be. **If you are together, Christmas is WITH your loved ones—regardless of whether there is money or not.**

Make it a point to find a way to celebrate. ***What are you doing to make things work out during this holiday season?***



*Jennifer is the PR and Communications contact for 5 Minutes for Mom. She has been married to her hubby for 19 years and is the mother of two wonderful teenagers. She home-schools and blogs about their experiences at [Jen's Journey](#). You can also find her on Facebook and Twitter*



## Creative Mix

Making a big batch of this Creative Mix is always at the top of my holiday to-do list. Although "crack" doesn't appear in the ingredient list, I dare you to taste this and tell me it's not in there. Seriously. Super addictive. Don't say I didn't warn you.

I make this every year and pass it to my co-workers who all then beg me for the recipe. It's easy, inexpensive, and delicious—sure to become a holiday staple in your household!

### Creative Mix

*Makes 13 cups*

- 4 cups each mini pretzels, Peanut Butter Captain Crunch, & Rice Chex
- 1 cup lightly salted peanuts
- 1 lb. Almond Bark
- 1 T. vegetable oil

Pour the oil over the almond bark and melt it in the microwave. I started with 3 minutes, then stirred and heated it in 30 second increments until everything was smooth--about 4 1/2 minutes total. While the chocolate melts, mix up the cereal, pretzels, and peanuts in a large bowl. Really--it's got to be your biggest one. But if you try to do this in a small bowl, you will fail. Just warning you.

Pour the melted almond bark over the cereal mixture and mix gently until everything is nicely coated. Spread over waxed paper to cool. Or if you happen to have forgotten the waxed paper, spray some plastic wrap with cooking spray and spread it over that. I tend to forget such things at the last minute, so it's good to have an alternative in a pinch, right?

Let it firm up--it happens pretty fast--then break into pieces and put into super cute cello bags that you can get at the dollar store.

***Your turn! What are your favorite holiday treats to make?***



Melissa Woodson is the community manager for @WashULaw, a [Master of Laws](#) offered through Washington University in St. Louis, as well as a contributor to the [LLM guide](#). In her spare time, she enjoys running, cooking, and making half-baked attempts at training her dog. Her personal blog may be found at [hungryhealthymj.com](http://hungryhealthymj.com)



## How to Create Beautiful Holiday Wreaths

Every year I make a new wreath for our front door, and this year I was inspired to make two fabric wreaths so that I can have one on each side to look at. I have a bin of cotton fabrics from past sewing projects so I put together two different colour schemes. The first wreath has a mix of patterns in cream, pink, red, and yellow - sometimes I like to choose non-traditional colors for my Holiday decorating. The second wreath has a white and green print with a solid green fabric mixed throughout.

I love that these fabric wreaths are so pretty and simple to make. Buy a wreath form in any size (I used 18" forms), select fabrics – cottons are easy to work with, linens or burlap will give more structure, and raw silks will add elegance; and put together an embellishment if desired. I used feather fascinators and some of my Grandmas' broaches, but anything can be used. Get creative with costume jeweler, fabric flowers, Christmas ornaments, etc., and stylize the wreath to fit the Holiday decor, or mood, of the rest of the home.



The whole project can be done in an afternoon (or in the evening with a glass of wine...), and it is quick to set up. Grab scissors, the wreath form, the fabric(s), and the embellishments. Cut the fabrics into strips – I used regular scissors because I don't mind the strips having raw edges. Pinking shears can be used for the cutting as well – they'll leave a zigzag edge. Then simply tie each strip around the wreath, and once they're all tied go back and shift and fluff the ties to give volume. Once this is done, just add the embellishment, and hang the wreath.



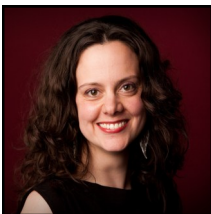
The other kind of wreath I made this season is a button wreath. Over the years I collected a container of random buttons - mine, my Moms', and my Mother-In-Laws' - and I decided to put them all together on a wreath. The buttons are a mix of pastel colors, bright colors and metallics, and the sizes vary from mini baby buttons to large coat buttons. (For a monochromatic look paint the wreath and then use buttons of only that color.)

The materials needed for this wreath are the buttons, a wreath form, paint for the wreath form, and a glue gun. Beads or other found objects can also be used in addition to, or instead of, buttons.

First I painted the wreath silver, and I waited until the next day to add the buttons. Once the wreath was dry I put it on a cutting mat and set the buttons on the mat to figure out button placement. I used the mat so that I could lift and move the project from the table without disturbing it or having to re-set up. (This wreath was a little more time consuming and I came back to it a few times.)

Once I was ready to begin gluing I started at the outside of the wreath and went once around, and then I moved in to start the next row, and so on. After all of the buttons were applied I went back over the wreath and glued on pearl beads to fill in any gaps.

What I like about this wreath is that I only had to purchase the wreath form. I was able to use silver paint from my 6 year old daughters' craft bin, and buttons that were just taking up space in my sewing box. My daughter has decided to hang it in her room, and she can think about her family whenever she looks at this sweet little wreath.



*I have always loved writing, and I hope that others can connect to what I have to say on my blog [Ruminating Mommy](#). My aim is to be open and honest, and perhaps witty from time to time. Currently, I am home with my daughters - 6 year old Ava & baby Madelaine. Along with spending my time taking care of my girls and writing, I also enjoy sewing and DIY projects.*

Blog: [Ruminating Mommy](#) Twitter: [@RuminatingMommy](#)



## A Mother's Dream

In this season of giving, it can sometimes be hard to identify which worthy cause to give your holiday donations to. There are so many charities to choose from that focus on a variety of different things. Recently, I have been inspired to pursue my passions and dreams as I've had the opportunity to become involved with a very special organization focused on educating street children in Malawi; and was founded by a loving mother who has given the best gift of all to a charity-herself.



Mother of three grown children and grandmother to one, Jennifer Dunkley was driven to start her own non-profit after spending a year in the impoverished country of Malawi where her husband had traveled for work. With a passion for helping people, she couldn't help but get involved with the community as a volunteer in a local organization that took children off the streets. Jennifer noticed that while this organization was able to help some children, they lacked the resources to provide the educational opportunities that the students needed to promise them a future without poverty. It was then that this empty-nester decided to take on another baby and founded Agape Scholars international (ASI), which provides educational assistance to orphans and vulnerable children living on the streets of Malawi. Jennifer started the organization in 2010 with eight needy children and her per-

This holiday season, ASI will be selling Malawi themed Christmas cards to help support the sponsorship of the children in ASI's Programs and to help generate funds for a new learning center for these needy children in Malawi. If you are interested in purchasing cards, or for more information on how you can get involved, please check out their website, <http://www.agapescholars.org>



## Lolli's Famous Christmas Caramels

I've been making these soft caramel candies every Christmas since I was a little kid. My mom taught us how to make caramel when we were little, and I have involved my kids in the process every year. It's a huge part of our holiday family tradition.

This recipe is pretty simple, but be prepared to have a tired arm after stirring.

### INGREDIENTS:

- ½ lb butter
- 2 cups light corn syrup
- 2 cups sugar
- 2 (15 oz ) cans sweetened condensed milk
- ½ cup flour
- 2 tsp vanilla



### PROCEEDURE:

1. Before you start cooking: measure 2 cups corn syrup; set aside. Mix together sweetened condensed milk and flour; set aside. Have everything close by. Spray a 9×13 pan with Pam or spread with butter, bottom only.
2. Melt butter in a large (3 qt or larger) non-stick pan. Add corn syrup and sugar. Bring to boil on med heat, stirring often, and boil for 5 minutes.
3. Remove pan from heat and stir in milk/flour mixture. Boil over med heat, stirring constantly until mixture darkens and reaches a medium hard ball stage (235° on candy thermometer). This usually takes me about 30-45 minutes. Be patient! Remove from heat and stir in vanilla.
4. Turn into greased pan and cool completely. Cut into 2 inch pieces with a buttered knife. Wrap pieces in small squares of wax paper. Makes over 100 pieces



Laura (Lolli) Franklin is a mother of five in the Washington D.C. area. Luckily, 16 years of being a mom has prepared her to keep her plate full, and she is doing just that today as a natural light photographer, author of the blog [Better in Bulk](http://www.betterinbulk.com), and a virtual assistant for other bloggers. Her daily life consists of a little bit of everything: food, photography, finances, shopping, books, music....and her blog reflects that. You can find Lolli on Twitter @1momof5 (<http://twitter.com/1momof5>) or on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/BetterinBulk>).

## More Holiday Wreaths!

Nothing says Christmas like a wreath on the door. Here is an inexpensive and easy way to make your home more festive for the holiday season with these wreaths that both cost less than \$10 apiece to make. Almost all of the materials were purchased at a local dollar store.

### Lighted Garland Window Wreath

#### **Items needed:**

24" wreath form approx. 35 feet of green garland

8" red velvet bow silver jingle bells

1 string of white Christmas lights

This wreath is the epitome of the holiday spirit and was made for \$9.50.

#### Directions

Step 1: Wrap the wreath with the green garland. To secure the first end, you can simply tie it around the wreath. Wrap tightly to ensure full coverage. Leave 5 inch gap of bare wreath form.

Step 2: In the 5 inch gap, attach the bow in the bare space. The wreath form that I used was braided wicker, so I wove the twist tie through a few pieces.

Step 3: Starting at the bottom middle, wrap the string of lights around the wreath, leaving the plug-in end of the string dangling. To secure the other end of the lights, I used a green pipe cleaner and buried it in the garland.

Step 4: Tie the jingle bells onto the wreath however you'd like. I used the silver string that was provided.

To hang this on a window, you'll need a large suction cup and an extension cord.



### Candy Cane Wreath

#### **Items needed:**

10" wreath form      30 feet of jute twine  
2 feet white and red striped ribbon    18" evergreen garland  
2 small candy canes      12" piece of red ribbon  
Mod podge (already owned)

#### Directions

This super-sweet and whimsical candy cane wreath was made for \$4.

Step 1: Prior to starting, unwrap the candy canes and cover with a light coat of mod podge. This will prevent them from getting sticky when exposed to the air for a while.

Step 2: Wrap the wreath form with the jute twine. Make sure it is as tight as possible to ensure all the wreath form is covered. It may be necessary to go back over some spots. To secure the beginning and end pieces, loop the twine around and tie it in a knot.

Step 3: Using the red and white striped ribbon, cover a little under half of the wreath. Use a hot glue gun to keep beginning and end pieces attached.

Step 4: Cover wreath form with evergreen garland. The type used had a metal center allowing it to be bent into shape.

Step 5: Once the candy canes are dry, hot glue them in whatever arrangement you wish onto the evergreen garland. Instead of these, you could also use the circular striped mint candies.

Step 6: To attach the hanging string, hot glue the end of the ribbon to the back of the wreath. Wrap several times before you create a loop. Then attach end of ribbon to the back of the wreath.



*Andie Jaye is a former preschool teacher turned SAHM of two kiddos. Her blog, [Crayon Freckles](http://CrayonFreckles.com) is an eclectic mix of play, art, and learning activities. Mingled in are her perspectives on being a crunchy momma, raising a long-haired hippy boy and using follow-your-gut parenting. See more of Andie on [Crayon Freckles' Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/CrayonFreckles)*

## Ave Maria

There are significant moments in life brought about by many different people, places and events. The holidays were always a source of excitement and wonder for me, yet never a single lasting moment remained etched in my mind, nor a frameable instant that would change my perspective. Like many, I anticipated Christmas for the gatherings, food and fun but even with each growing year, the seasons of tradition blended into an immense pool of similarity, familiarity and consistency. This Christmas will mark the tenth anniversary of the day that changed.

One of my earliest childhood memories goes back to sitting on the kitchen sink counter, windows wide open with Grandma beside me. I must have been about three years old when she lived in that place, and we'd lay peanuts on the sill as we watched squirrels steal them away. She was a widow by then, my grandpa having passed only ten years before. She'd tell me stories about the man that meant so much to her, and comment about ways in which I was just like him. Unlike many of my older cousins, I never met my grandpa, but I knew him.



Questions about Grandpa were always answered with an endless desire to remember, and a heavy heart of longing. She spoke softly yet fondly of the love of her life, mementos and photos punctuating her apartment, reminders of the life she lived before I entered this world. We bonded over newspaper clippings of Grandpa's baseball games, and photos of their early relationship. An ever-present reminder of her bond with my late grandfather loomed as the bed remained available only to her, and her rings – from him – were never parted from her finger.

I remember realizing how special that love must have been. She told me their story every time I asked, as though I'd never heard it before. She'd laugh at his tenacity telling me, "I had better things to do than settle down with some man, but he wouldn't give up!" We'd laugh together as she'd recount the day she finally gave in and agreed to be his wife, and then smile remembering how happy that decision had made them both.



I grew up knowing what it meant to be in love, to marry your best friend, and to care for another unequivocally. I saw it in my parent's marriage too. It is what I came to expect of love.

The first Christmas I spent with the man who became my husband was that very Christmas ten years ago. We left university together and headed out to the snowy prairies of my youth to spend the holidays with my family. As in many Christmas' before, we were welcomed by my parents and brothers with open arms, delectable treats and holiday warmth of heart. We sat together and told stories around the table and drank hot chocolate into the night. On the morning of Christmas Eve, my oldest brother woke me with instruction to make for the living room. My world and my outlook would never be the same

I found my parents on the couch, my mom inconsolable. After six months of congestive heart failure, Grandma had passed. Services would be held on Boxing Day, and we had to head out to be with the family. I have never lost a parent so cannot know the grief my mother felt but in that moment, I did not mourn the loss of my grandma. I felt her arms around me, saw the sparkle of her blue eyes, and knew that after nearly 30 years, this year, this Christmas, she would finally be reunited with the man she loved, and I was happy for her.

Throughout my youth countless hours had been spent performing as an instrumentalist and a vocalist and, Grandma was always in my audience. It was only fitting then, as a vocally trained musician at a service for an avowed classical music lover with whom I shared that love, I would sing. Franz Schubert's *Ave Maria*.

Every year since that Christmas I hear this piece -in malls, sung by choirs, on Christmas movies - and the sound of that glorious soprano gives me pause. I remember her, I feel her in my heart, I know she –and he – are with me. Christmas is about family, about coming together and celebrating love, compassion, unity and joy. The symbol of that love, the first example I have ever known about enduring and truly unconditional love, resides in a piece of music loved by one very special lady who graced my life. From now until forever I will always remember what it is to feel that love when I look my parents, at my husband, and when I hear that piece, I smile. We are always together for the holidays.



*As a Certified Exercise Physiologist, Elaine has worked with many clients looking to make positive lifestyle changes. From athletes, to degenerative disease, to parents adapting to busy schedules, Elaine has spent many years teaching healthy lifestyle and supportive methods for living well. Her own experience as an injured athlete and in struggling with weight gain and loss, contributes to her work in understanding the barriers that can limit us from realizing our best. Taking a positive spin and with a bit of humor, Elaine tackles the science and culture of health, to help readers realize that living healthy is achievable for everyone, everyday. Visit her at [www.dailychoicesaddup.com](http://www.dailychoicesaddup.com)  
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/dailychoicesaddupcom/222115521145776>  
[www.facebook.com/DailyChoicesAddUp](http://www.facebook.com/DailyChoicesAddUp)*

## Chocolate Drops

These little cookies are a delicious addition to every holiday platter and a Christmas treat in our house. Taking very little time to prepare and even less to devour, whipping up a batch is a delicious way to enjoy the holidays.

### *Ingredients:*

- 2 Cups white sugar
- 6 Tbsp coco powder
- ½ Cup butter
- ½ Cup milk
- ½ Tsp vanilla extract
- 3 Cups oats
- 1 Cup shredded coconut



### *Directions:*

In a large saucepan, over medium high heat, combine butter and milk.

Add sugar and sifted coco powder, mixing well until dissolved. Add vanilla.

Remove from heat, adding oats and coconut. Continue to mix well until combined.

### *Assembly Line:*

On a parchment lined tray, drop heaping tablespoons of batter.

Place in fridge until chilled. Serve and enjoy!



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<http://www.facebook.com/pages/dailychoicesaddupcom/222115521145776>  
[www.facebook.com/DailyChoicesAddUp](http://www.facebook.com/DailyChoicesAddUp)*

## Tackling the Holiday To-Do List

The other day I was on my way to a costume party and I quickly ran into the grocery store to grab some Halloween cookies. The frightening part of this activity was not all of the gory costumes or the tempting candy, but the fact that all of the Christmas decorations were already on display!

As hard as it is to believe, the 2012 holiday season is beginning so my "Tackle It Tuesday" project is to get a jumpstart on my greeting card preparations. If you are ready to get started on this activity, check out these tips to jumpstart the process:

- **Update new addresses.** Delete old addresses and verify any changes in contact information.
- **Review the card list.** Limit the list to fifty contacts. Consider sending cards to long distance friends or contacts you only see occasionally.
- **Make address labels.** Type all of the addresses in a label format. Set a goal to complete this before Thanksgiving so that everything will be ready to print when you need it.
- **Select pictures.** If you are sending photo cards or inserting snapshots in your holiday greetings, narrow down the choices or make a photography sitting appointment soon.
- **Outline a letter.** If you like to send family updates with your cards, now is a perfect time to draft your holiday letter. When writing a family Christmas letter, check out the past year's calendar to remind you of funny and happy memories you have enjoyed throughout the year.
- **Stamp it.** Avoid waiting in long lines at the post office and order your holiday stamps online through the [postal service](#).
- **Return to sender.** To speed the card addressing process up, consider buying return address labels or a printed stamp.
- **Set an appointment.** If the job of dealing with holiday greeting cards is a little overwhelming, make an appointment (in the near future) with yourself to handle this task.



***Have you started any of your holiday preparations yet?***

*Originally posted on the 5 Minutes for Mom site.*

## How to Create a Gorgeous Holiday Mantle

When decorating my home for the holidays, I always begin by creating a festive mantle. This year, with help from Joann Fabric and Craft Stores, I decided to create a brand new mantle design. Decorating a gorgeous holiday mantle can be done easily, if you follow some simple steps.

Over the past several years, I have been adding lime green to my holiday decorations. I like the color, it mixes with the interior of my home and with the metallic decorations I have collected over the years. When planning the décor for your mantle, choosing a color scheme will be your first and most important step. I used primarily lime green with a few silver accents for my mantle. I wanted a monochromatic look, but you don't have to do this. A bold mix of colors can be just as beautiful. As you consider the color scheme you want, think about the following:

- Decide firmly on a primary color for your mantle décor.
- Choose one or two accent colors that compliment your primary color.
- Steer clear of the traditional red and green color combination. Instead, think about combining classic red or green with a more contemporary shade such as light blue, lime green, orange or hot pink.
- Consider metallics your home decorating neutral that can blend with any color combination

Making a firm choice of color combination will make creating your mantle easier. As you layer pieces into your garland, everything you add will blend perfectly into your existing design and allow you to get creative. All of your materials will “go” together.

Once you have chosen your color scheme you are ready to begin gathering the materials you will use to create your gorgeous holiday mantle.

You may feel like you have too many things to include in your mantle. You will not. It takes much more material than you would ever guess to create a full, rich looking mantle design. Buy more than you think you will need. Leave the tags on until you use it. If you don't use it, you can return it, but I bet you won't need to. The first time I made a mantle I really liked I made multiple trips to Joann's to buy more and more supplies. It seems the more you add to the garland, the better it looks.





Let's consider the things you will need to create a full, rich looking holiday mantle.

Your shopping list might look something like this:

**Pine or other green garland** Measure your mantle, but likely nine feet long will be what you need. Make sure to allow for overhang down the sides of the mantle. I had about eighteen inches on each side.

**Snowy green branches or any branches you like that work with your color scheme.** My mantle has lots of glitter, so I chose the snowy branches for some texture and contrast.

**Overlay garland** Buy two pieces, or enough to cover the entire pine garland. Choose something finer and thinner than your pine garland. You will weave this into your green garland for texture and contrast.

**Flowers** I used three different kinds of flowers in my mantle. I used twenty dark lime silk hydrangeas, three large sequined poinsettias and four clip on glittery, shiny poinsettias. A variety of shapes and sizes will help provide depth and texture.

**Glittered branches, berries or feathers** I used five on the front of my mantle.

**Metallic branches or picks** I used a few small, silver ones (primarily on each end) to provide contrast and shimmer.

**Ribbon** Choose **wired** ribbon. Wide ribbon is easiest to work with. Mine was two and a half inches. Cut the ribbon into approximately thirty inch pieces to make it easy to work with.

**Natural element** I chose several birds in three sizes. They blend in with the rest of the mantle design. You might try butterflies, dragonflies, anything you like. This is entirely optional. I consider it the finishing touch.

The obvious first item is your **green garland**. Buy a nice, thick, high quality garland. This is an investment in holiday decorating you will use year after year. Cheap garland comes out of a storage box looking spindly and misshapen. High quality garland can be easily fluffed into shape and will look great year after year. If you want a very thick garland, you can intertwine two pieces of garland, weaving them together.

Place your green garland on the mantle. Center it, then step back and check if the amount of drop on the sides is even. I eyeballed mine, and then got out the tape measure. I adjusted the garland so I had about eighteen inches hanging down on each side, from the edge of the mantle down to the tip of the greens. Next you will want to secure the garland. This is an extremely important step or you will find yourself back at step one repeatedly. I use floral tape and scotch tape. It is important that the tape does not show. Lift the branches of the garland and tape under and in between the branches. It is better to secure smaller sections. They are easier to work with and cooperate better than large sections. If you just had your mantle painted or have another objection to tape, you can do yours the way my girlfriend does. She uses heavy candlesticks and decorative objects to anchor the garland. She weaves branches around to keep the garland looking full. It doesn't matter how you do it, just be sure to firmly anchor the garland to the mantle. This is the foundation for your entire mantle design, so it needs to stay in place.



After securing the green garland to the mantle, I added **branches frosted with snow** to the ends of the garland. I chose these for a rustic touch to my otherwise green and sparkly mantle design. I used three branches. I used one on each end of the garland. I cut apart the third, adding half to each side.

This would be a great place for an extra pair of hands. An older child could hold the garland as you begin securing it. Perhaps you have a friend you could return the favor to. My friend Paula, who anchors her garland to her mantle, helped me with mine. Next week I will help with hers. I can't remember the last time we spent that much uninterrupted time together. Another pair of eyes can be helpful as you work your way through the steps of creating your mantle décor. Have fun with your holiday decorating!

The next step is to add a **finer, thinner overlay garland** to your pine garland. I chose a leafy, metallic green garland. I like to buy two shorter pieces. When adding them to the mantle, I start at the end so I can position the tip of the overlay garland where I want it on the pine. I did not have this go all the way to the end of my green garland, but you could. I started on one side, and then moved to the opposite side. Where the two pieces meet in the middle, I used wire cutters to remove extra length so it didn't get too thick in the middle.



Be sure to weave this into your green garland, lifting branches to blend well. For my mantle, this started the shine and sparkle. You can use any material you like, it doesn't have to shine. Consider this a chance to add start adding texture and color.

After your overlay garland, add some **glittered branches, berries or feathers**

on the edge of your garland. I like these to cascade over the front of the mantle, sticking out a little bit. You can bend them to find the perfect position. What works best will be determined at least partially by the material you use. If you are working with a friend, have her stand back and eyeball the placement for you.

After your overlay garland and additional stems, it is time to have fun with flowers. You can use any kind of flowers you like. I love hydrangeas.

Your next step is to incorporate **ribbon** into your mantle. Ribbon is a terrific way to add color, texture and shine to your mantle. If your other materials are limited, ribbon can help fill in your mantle design. There are a few important things to keep in mind about selecting ribbon:

**Avoid sheer ribbon.** It does not provide enough impact.

**Wired ribbon** is essential. It allows you to manipulate the shape and tie beautiful, fluffy bows easily.

Choose ribbon **at least two inches thick**. Thin ribbon does **not** work well in a mantle design.

Your gorgeous holiday mantle is now essentially complete. As a finishing touch, you may want to incorporate an **element from nature**.

## Ginny's Tea Cups

With the holidays right around the corner it can be a dilemma on what to bake for your next family gathering. But don't fret, here is a easy breezy recipe especially for you non-cooks.

Every Thanksgiving and Christmas, my (now late) mother-in-law would make these yummy pecan tea cups, which she honorably called "Ginny's Tea Cups". So when I was given the recipe soon after she had passed, I made sure to carry on the tradition each and every holiday. And trust me, not on piece of crumb is left behind.

### Ingredients:

#### Dough:

- 1 – stick of margarine or butter
- 1 – cup of flour
- 1- 3 oz cream cheese

#### Filling:

- 1- cup brown sugar (packed or loose)
- 1- egg
- 1- ½ tbsp of soft butter
- 1 - tbsp vanilla
- 1 – cup pecans or walnuts





# HOME for the Holidays 2012



## Directions:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In medium bowl, cream softened butter and cream cheese. Add flour. Mix well. Chill dough for 20-30 minutes. Divide dough into fourths and then roll each into six balls. Place one ball in each cup of a mini tart pan. Use your fingers or a tart tamper to press out into a tart shell.

In medium bowl, combine egg, brown sugar, melted butter, vanilla, and pecans or walnuts. Mix well. Fill tart shells 2/3 full. Bake for 25-30 minutes until delicately browned. Allow to cool for 10 minutes and then remove from pan. Sprinkle with powered sugar



*About the author: Gina Pomponio is the Founding Editor of [Mommy Posh](http://MommyPosh.com), a mom fashion blog about getting-and-staying fabulous during motherhood. Gina lives in New York City with her toddler son and husband of 12 years. For more tips on mom"me"moments and being a posh mom, follow her on Twitter: @Mommyposh and facebook.com/mommyposh*

## The Broken Pretzel

For the last three years I have made my usual Christmas treats of full length decorated pretzel rods to take to parties or send to my husband's co-workers. Walking into any room with this container will invariably lead to conversations that stop as all eyes, and eventually feet, follow the treats gloriously displayed and illuminated by the sun's intense rays parting the heavens. One can almost hear the angels playing their harps.



**The broken pretzels were saved for my children, as others came first.** For three years this happened. I never gave it a second thought. Walking out the door to get more supplies, my oldest son asked me a question that made my heart stop. "Mommy, may I have a broken pretzel?" He did not ask for a pretzel

He did not ask for a *whole* pretzel **He asked for a broken pretzel**

Leftovers... My leftovers

**realized this year would be different.**

The pretzels were finished as my precious boys slept soundly in their beds. The next afternoon after we finished lunch I apologized to my boys for giving them broken pretzels. I apologized for giving my best to other people first and for giving my children my leftovers. Their gracious and loving hearts did not fully understand the depth of my sin, yet they freely forgave me with hugs and kisses.

Not a broken one. A whole pretzel. And not just one...but two!

"But many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first." – Matthew 19:30



Wendy Wright is a homeschooling photographer of two boys who writes from her heart about the journey of letting go of heartache and pain while learning to dance in the rain. Social media is her virtual water cooler where there is always a party to attend or someone to pray for. When not busy teaching, writing, or behind the camera lens, she is often found increasing her Xbox 360 gamer score. Wendy owns Choosing Love and Arizona Moms Network. Visit her at <http://www.choosinglove.net> Follow her at Twitter: @ChoosingLoveAZ and on Instagram at @ChoosingLoveAZ

## A Christmas Tree for Small Spaces



When we moved into our 816 square foot home, I knew that space would be tight. I also knew that meant that I would need to be creative.

Thus, as Christmas neared, I began to consider our Christmas tree options. Having a six month old added to the problem. A full-sized tree was out of the picture. Then there was the small potted Christmas tree that I purchased a few years back when I lived alone in an apartment.

Although it served us well in the past, its branches were looking a little dry.

While working in the backyard, I noticed some discarded tomato vine stakes. I knew they would be great for some sort of crafty project.

I decided to use them to create a “tree” that would be safe and small for our tiny, baby-proofed home.

Wrap it with Christmas tree boughs and lights, with a few ornaments.  
Spray paint green and wrap in lights.  
Cover in Christmas cards.  
Wrap in Christmas fabric.  
Cover in felt and make felt ornaments to stick to it.

My finished tree fit perfect in our little space. Get creative if you live in a small home.

Don't just assume that because you live in a small space you have to use the traditional little potted tree..

*Written by Jennifer Nanngina*

## Pilgrim Hat Cookies

These little cookies are fun and festive! My kids even as grown as they are, love making these together during the holidays.

Here is what you will need:

- 1 bag of large marshmallows
- 1 bag of semi-sweet chocolate chips
- 1 bag of chocolate striped cookies
- 1 tube of yellow icing



### Directions

Lay out your cookies, stripe side down. Then take your chocolate chips and melt them in the microwave. The best thing to do is do it in thirty second intervals, stirring between each one. After you have done that, take a toothpick and stick in the marshmallow and roll it around in the chocolate.

Once you have rolled it around in the chocolate, pop it on top of a cookie. Continue this until you have finished all the cookies.

Stick them in the refrigerator to give the chocolate time to harden up. Once they have hardened, then you can pipe the yellow icing on them.

These make great little name holders for the holidays if you can keep your kids out of them!



*Jennifer is the PR and Communications contact for 5 Minutes for Mom. She has been married to her hubby for 19 years and is the mother of two wonderful teenagers. She homeschools and blogs about their experiences at [Jen's Journey](http://Jen's Journey). You can also find her on Facebook and Twitter*



## A Letter to My Girls

To my sweet little girls, Averi, Lily and Charlotte,

It's that magical time of year again. The time where we come together as a family to celebrate the warmth and wonder that is Christmastime. The time to reflect upon our year together and all of its beautiful idiosyncrasies and imperfect moments. The time when we get to eat loads of delicious foods, make snow angels, listen to heartwarming and joyful music, help those in need, frequent festive events, bake together, sing together, decorate our tree together, LOVE TOGETHER and all pray that Lily doesn't eat too much yellow snow.

It's truly the best time of the year. (And, thank God we don't have a dog.)

As a child, Christmas was always a magical time for me, too. My own family didn't suffer any hardships, or struggle with any strained relationships, or even experience as much as an unfortunate misgiving at this time of year. I don't have a sor-did or tragic story to tell about Christmas past. My stories include how blessed I've been and how much joy it brought, for the same reasons it does for you.

But, as a mother, I can tell you a story about how, this year, after 5 years of having children, Christmas is fixing me.

Every mom wants to be "perfect." That definition is different for everyone, but for me, it generally equates to, "keep a roof over your head, love in your heart and feed you at least 3 times a day." (\* Some days may vary. See disclaimer.)



## HOME for the Holidays 2012

Sounds simple, right? Except it's not so simple at all. Because life throws in a wrench or two and messes your house up, gives you deadlines, breaks your roof, gives your kids an endless supply of winter snot, and transforms you into a hormonal, crazed, in-need-of-a-hair-appointment psychopath who no longer knows how to use her "inside voice." Right before your middle child pops a squat and does her business in the middle of the kitchen floor. Twice.

Suddenly, things aren't so perfect anymore.

This isn't uncommon, though. This story isn't Earth-shattering. What's Earth-shattering is how much "business" one small child can produce on the kitchen floor. (*See disclaimer. Again.*)

I've had one of these imperfect years. Because of other commitments, I've been overwhelmed, stressed, maniacal, inattentive and yelled more than I care to remember. I'm not proud of those moments. That's not to say that every moment has been like this, but as I reflect back upon the year, I know they became more plentiful as the busy months went by.



But then something happened a couple of weeks ago. I began to think about Christmas. I saw Christmas lights. I heard Christmas music. And it did something to me. It brought me back to that beautiful place as a child. It brought me back to that beautiful place among my husband and three daughters. And I thought, why am I going crazy over things? Why am I freaking out all the time? Why do I so easily get upset with my kids? What are they really doing wrong? Why can't I craft? WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE?

Wait. Don't leave. Stick with me while I get all Lifetime Channel on you.

I started to think about you girls.

I started to think of all the times Averì softly whispered, “I love my family so much,” or Lily proclaimed, “My mommy and daddy and sisters are my heart,” or when Charlotte took her tiny 22 month-old hands and gently caressed her sisters’ faces while mumbling in that almost-2 year-old voice, “Wuv you.” Or when we visited New York City and walked by a homeless man sleeping on the ground and you, Averì girl, not understanding who he was or what he was doing, spotted him and immediately turned to us with utmost concern and quietly said, “Mom, we need to help that man.” Or the time when you, Lily, saw an unfamiliar little girl crying across the playground, so you ran up to her, hugged her, wiped her tear, and asked if she was OK. Or the countless times we’ve been shopping in Target and you’ve both asked the passing elderly ladies or other children to come to your house for dinner. (I think we almost had a taker. In which case, I should definitely make corn pudding. Or at least have chocolate ready.)

I thought how you, my dear girls--whether you know it or not--ARE Christmas. And you’re the kind of genuine, unassuming, innocent, loving Christmas that lasts all year long.

Yes, you make messes and maintain the ability to annoy the heck out of me. But, I was flooded by the kindness in your hearts. And wondered how, as a mom, I’d become so cynical about something as insignificant as dragging your bed comforter into the living room.

I don’t want to be that mom. I can’t be that mom.

So, every time you scoop a ball of cookie dough onto the baking sheet, thank us for taking you to the playground on a sunny winter Saturday afternoon, squeal with excitement when you spot the first snowflake paving way to your snowman-creating zone, smile widely at the mere sight of a hot chocolate on the kitchen counter, anxiously anticipate Santa’s arrival, or claim “the best day ever” to be the one at the tree farm, where we tagged our soon-to-be living room adornment, I want you to know, I hear you. Every moment you appreciate, I want you to know, I feel it.

This newfound calm has been miraculous. I’m not upset. I’m not stressed. I don’t tell you to “wait a minute” after every question. I talk with you. I help you. I still can’t craft, but we’re moving forward. It’s like a switch has gone off in my head and I am soothed and content. But, I still need a hair appointment.

## HOME for the Holidays 2012

You girls are my inspiration. My heroes. The kind of people I want to be when I grow up. So, thank you for reminding me what Christmas is all about, not only at this time of year, but within every day.

Love you always,  
Mommy

*\* Disclaimer: Never after midnight. You eat triple your weight in food, daily. I only forgot to feed you once.*



Jen Senecal is a mom to 3 young daughters and the founder of [Keekoin](#), where she blogs humorously about the adventures of parenthood, while covering kids fashion & style, local events, giveaways, and other lifestyle topics. She is also a contributing blogger for [Providence Media](#) magazines, [Manilla](#) and [Buy-her.com](#). She is the co-founder of an award-winning local deals, fashion, events and giveaway site, [Rhody Mamas](#), and is a graphic designer, photography enthusiast, event coordinator and has served as a Conde Nast mom-advisor. She has a freakish obsession with pens, abuses adverbs and eats popcorn at least twice a week. Jen lives with her husband and three daughters in Rhode Island and looks forward to the day when DVR can record more than two shows at a time. Follow her on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).



## Greeting Card Branch Holder



The amount of cards we receive each holiday season vary, but when we do, I always like to display them in a fun way. Sometimes I'll arrange them on the fridge along with some festive window clings, and sometimes I'll clip them to a pretty ribbon on the wall. This year, I decided to get a little fancy, yes, a little early :-). I created a greeting card holder using a branch I snapped off of a tree. This craft is an easy way to add some holiday flare to living spaces. Depending on how many cards that come in, you can make more or combine multiple branches to display more cards.

So let's get started!

## Materials

- Tree branches with a handful of smaller branches
- Grosgrain ribbon cut into 2" lengths
- Red Matte spray paint
- Glue gun or double stick tape
- Small round red ornaments

## Instructions

Clean branches & remove any leaves from stem. Spray paint the branches with red paint. Set aside to dry.

Take a 2" ribbon and fold to create a loop. Glue ends together. Flip the greeting card so the reverse side faces you.

Take a loop & glue it to the top center of each card. Set aside to dry. Attach loops you've created to the other cards. Take the dry painted branches & place on mantelpiece making sure its secure & weighted down. Hang your greeting cards on the branches. Spruce up with Christmas ornaments.

*What crafts are you tackling this holiday season?*



Sheena Tatum is the publisher of, [Sophistishe](#), a personal lifestyle blog where she shares a mix of family stories, quirky thoughts, and reflections using her love for photography.

## Green Bean Bundles

My first taste of green bean bundles came about 6 years ago at a women's luncheon I attended. These things are delicious! They are also festive and make a great appetizer as well if you don't want to use them as a side item. However, I am serving them alongside my taters and gravy this year for Thanksgiving! Hope you enjoy this yummy dessert!

### Ingredients

- 3 (14.5 ounce) cans whole green beans, drained
- 1 pound bacon, cut in half
- 1/2 cup butter, melted
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon garlic salt

### Directions

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Grease a 9×13 inch baking dish.
2. Wrap 7 green beans with bacon and place in prepared dish. Repeat, using all the green beans and bacon.
3. Combine butter with brown sugar. Pour over green bean bundles and sprinkle with garlic salt.
4. Cover with foil and bake for 45 minutes.



If you want to crisp the bacon a little more, turn the broiler on for a few minutes after removing the foil.

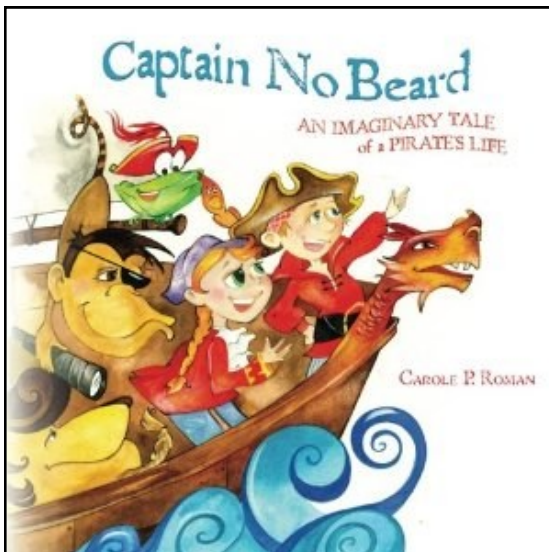
Serve these along side your favorite holiday meats!



*Jennifer is the PR and Communications contact for 5 Minutes for Mom. She has been married to her hubby for 19 years and is the mother of two wonderful teenagers. She homeschools and blogs about their experiences at [Jen's Journey](http://Jen's Journey). You can also find her on Facebook and Twitter*



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The circle washer (1 inch in diameter) is adorned Swarovski birthstone crystals that corresponds with each names.

