

Decorating for Hanukkah and Kwanzaa

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Among the hundreds of books, articles and websites you can find at this time of year on holiday decorating, there's no shortage of ideas for Christmas. Tips are available for every type of Christmas you can imagine—country, Victorian, high-tech, minimal, maximal... You name it. But most of these resources don't even consider the other holidays that fall around the same time, the biggest of these being Hanukkah and Kwanzaa. But don't worry—with some effort, it's possible to find plenty of ideas for these holidays as well. And we've got you covered right here with some background info and tips to get you started!

Kwanzaa is a seven-day December holiday celebrating unity, creativity and resourcefulness within the African American community. Some consider it an alternative to Christmas, but many more people celebrate both. It begins the day after Christmas and the highlight is a feast on the second-to-last day (New Year's Eve) called the karamu. "Kwanzaa" means "first fruit of the harvest" in the East African language Swahili, and each day of the celebration honors one of seven community-building principles that are also given Swahili names. These are: umoja (unity), kujichagulia (self-determination), ujima (collective work and responsibility), ujamaa (cooperative economics), nia (purpose), kuumba (creativity), and imani (faith).

Some items that are essential to celebration, which can make up a great deal of the decorations for the holiday, are the mkeka (the straw mat on which the food for the karamu is served), mazao (fruits and vegetables representing the harvest), muhindi (ears of corn representing the children of the household) the kikombe cha umoja (unity cup) and the kinara, a candelabra holding seven candles. A candle is lit at the end of each day of the celebration to honor that day's principle.

Decorating for Kwanzaa can be as simple as creating an attractive centerpiece of the mkeka just for the feast, or you can decorate the entire home with Kwanzaa crafts to last throughout the holiday. To keep within the spirit of third principle, ujima, it is ideal to make your preparations a communal activity, and to do everything by hand in keeping with the sixth principle, kuumba. This is why you won't find a great number of ready-made Kwanzaa decorations on the market.

A traditional mkeka centerpiece will hold the kinara with its seven candles, the kikombe cha umoja (unity cup) filled with wine or grape juice, a bowl of mazao (fruits and vegetables), an ear of muhindi (corn) for each child in the household, and any gifts that will be given that night. If there are no children in the household, two ears of corn can be used to represent community parenthood.

At the heart of Kwanzaa color scheme is the flag of African American unity, which features wide bands of red, green and black. Use these colors for streamers, balloons and swaths of fabric draped over furniture and curtain rods. The *muhindi*, or ears of corn, are another popular decorative motif. They are usually grouped according to the number of children in the household; for example, a home with three children would be decorated with ears of corn in bunches of three.

And speaking of kids, getting them involved in decorating is part of Kwanzaa tradition, just like with Christmas. Streamers made of rings of construction paper (remember those?), handmade paper flags, construction-paper corn adorned with real corn kernels and husks, and decorative ceremonial cups covered with tin foil are some great ideas to start with.

Hanukkah, or the Festival of Lights, is an eight-day Jewish holiday celebrating a miracle that is said to have happened in Jerusalem in about 165 B.C.E. Legend says that around late December, a small band of Jewish soldiers called the Maccabees defeated the Greeks, who had desecrated a Jewish temple in the city by conducting pagan rituals there and decreed that the Jews do the same. After a successful rebellion against all odds (they were wildly outnumbered), they went to re-light the ceremonial light, which was fueled with oil. But there was only enough oil for one night, so they had to go looking for more—and miraculously, that one day’s worth of oil lasted for the entire eight days that they were gone.

Today the miracle is celebrated by lighting a menorah, a candelabra holding nine candles—one for each day the oil lasted, and one “helper” candle to light the others. Similar to the lighting of the Kwanzaa kinara, one candle of the menorah is lit each evening until they all shine brightly. Other symbols associated with Hanukkah are the dreidl, a four-sided spinning top with Hebrew symbols on each side (children play a Hanukkah game with it); gelt, or chocolate money (sometimes real money) given to children; the kiddush cup from which everyone sips wine or grape juice; and, of course, the golden Star of David.

Hanukkah is traditionally not nearly as flashy a holiday as Christmas has become, so most families don’t deck out the entire house in stars and menorahs, with neon dreidls on the roof and such. But in recent years, increasing numbers of Hanukkah decorations in traditional royal blue and silver have appeared on the market, from streamers to blue and white lights. And a vast assortment of menorahs is available to suit every taste, from country-cozy to deconstructionist chic. And for those so inclined, if competition with the neighbors is an issue, great big light-up rooftop decorations in the shape of menorahs, stars of David (and dreidls too) can be found at www.wwcp.com.

A nice centerpiece can be assembled using an attractive menorah, a kiddush cup, a few dreidls and a few pieces of gelt. Like with any centerpiece, some winter foliage or flowers might work well as accents. For the rest of the house, it’s all a matter of taste and opinion. Some people feel that making a big deal of Hanukkah by going all out with decorations is suggestive of making it compete with Christmas, which they find inappropriate since Hanukkah is traditionally not a major holiday on the Jewish calendar. Some others want to make it as bright and festive as possible in the interest of keeping their kids from envying the Christmas hullabaloo.

For those who want to decorate the whole house, Hanukkah is another great opportunity to get the kids involved. Think construction paper streamers, yellow felt stars of David, cardboard-and-foil

kiddush cups. And it's easy to make a dreidl out of clay or play-doh, or even a square of paper and a pencil: Fold the corners of the paper into the center, write a hebrew character on each corner and tape it down, and stick a sharpened pencil through the middle.

Have fun, and Happy Holidays!

— Holly McWhorter