



guest lists.... well, just get started, and the sooner the better!

Next, determine what you consider to be your number one pitfall, make note of it and plunge.

My earliest Christmas preparation is a one-word reminder: DIET. Over the years, I have tried various dodges so that I could enter the season fat and happy. Last year, I settled for new clothes rather than a new figure. The voluminous styles in vogue at the time gave me heart, and I filled my closet with blousy, gathered things, and "floated" around at holiday parties, eating the goodies, content that no one could suspect what sins my new wardrobe hid.

Wrong! I forgot that all the kissers and huggers come out of the woodwork for the holidays.

I've learned, too, to start the gift list early. As a year-round buyer, I'm prone to come up with umpteen presents for Mr. Easy and nothing, year after year, for Mrs. Difficult. If I don't start my Christmas list with the January New Year's resolutions, I've already blown it.

One old friend said the trick was to load up on "neutral" gifts, suitable for anyone. Then, no matter who you forget, there'll be a ready supply. I should have taken her advice last year. Christmas Eve, Cousin Lou called to say she was going to get Uncle Fred out for the day and bring him along. I raced to wrap a gift and found only one left in my men's supply. I still wonder what the nursing home laundress thinks when she folds those shorts that say, "Hey, Babe!"

I honestly try, too, to get my cards out early. Thanksgiving weekend I set up a card table and tackle the job. Traditionally, I get through the A's and B's (all with chatty notes) and then something happens. Or, more correctly, nothing else happens.

Christmas week I started skipping around the list, getting out a few "musts," and frantically I phone a few golden oldies to say, "I'll get to you later!"

But I can't leave the card subject without two observations. One is that, contrary to those well-meaning reminders that you could feed stray dogs or foreign children with the money you spend on cards and postage, there ARE people (many of them) who love to get greetings from you.

The other has to do with "the Christmas letter." You know, the "big brag," sent wholesale. I have to admit, I have sometimes joined the jeering section, but I confess, also, that I LIKE to keep up with doings of friends and family. (And if Mina thinks her Herb Jr. is such a hotshot, wait till I tell her about our Harold!)

My decorating list never gets made, but some of the decorations get hung. Actually, I usually make a vow, rather than a list: I vow I'll have a tree that is a work of art this year. Then I get out the ornaments, sorting them to discard, and I find the foil-wrapped cottage cheese carton lid brought home by kindergartner No. 1; the miniature hand-knitted red wool socks, complete with moth holes; the tree top "baby angel," her nose nicked from the year the cat pulled over the tree, and I opt for nostalgia. Love is blind where Christmas memories are concerned.

One note in regard to decorations: Buy your greens early. The wreaths left the last week will fit everybody's door but yours; and "bundled greens" is a euphemism for "dried out, hacked up, poor shaped, unsalable trees." The needles will all too soon be suitable for stuffing in a satin pillow with liquid embroidery, "I pine for you and balsam."

There is one list I try to avoid. That's the menu and accompanying grocery list. I wait, hopefully, for an invitation to somebody's Christmas dinner. But it never comes.

Now, when it comes to Christmas, the immenseness of the task can overwhelm without meticulous planning, so the first priority is to make a list—a list of lists, of course!

There are address lists, gift lists, grocery lists, "duty" lists, visiting lists,

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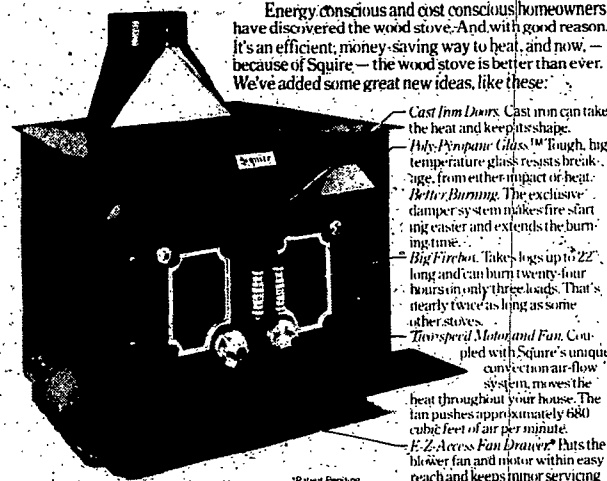
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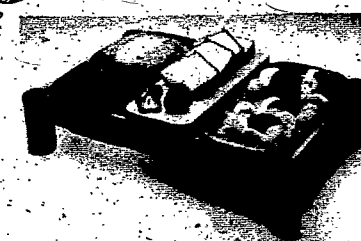
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