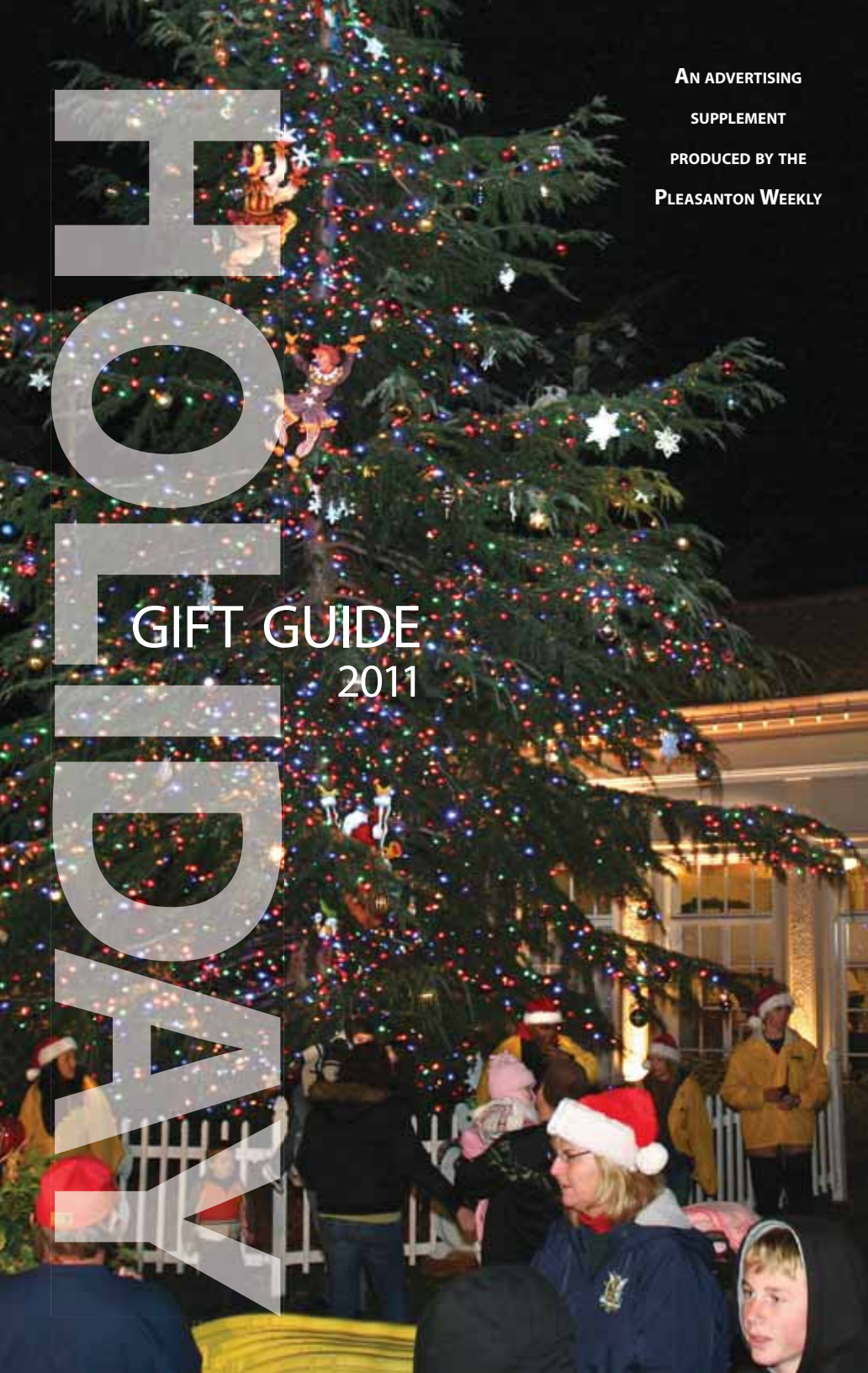


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# Pleasanton Hometown Holidays

## Parade, tree lighting set for Dec. 3

Pleasanton's annual Hometown Holidays Celebration takes place this year on Saturday, Dec. 3, with the parade beginning at 5 p.m. featuring floats, marching bands, community groups and more. This parade is the biggest of the year in town, as residents welcome the holidays and enjoy their charming downtown.

On the cover, festivities around the massive tree in front of the Museum on Main by the Pleasanton Arch include a community sing-along and, of course, a special appearance by Santa. Mayor Jennifer Hosterman will light the tree at approximately 6-6:30 p.m.

For more information, call the city of Pleasanton at 931-5352.



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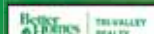
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# O! Christmas tree!

With proper treatment, the magic will last for weeks

Pick your Christmas tree carefully, treat it right, and enjoy it for many weeks — by which time you'll probably be more than ready to recycle the ol' 2011 holiday greens.

Don't purchase a dying tree planning to nurse it back to life. If you buy one at a lot, select a tree that's been properly maintained, preferably standing in the shade and in a tree stand with water. Test the freshness by gently stroking a branch end as though it were the tail of a pet cat. All cut trees will drop some needles when fondled but a good fresh tree won't lose many.

When a tree is cut, its base forms resin on the bottom that stops it from absorbing water very well, which causes drying. Refresh the tree when you get it to your home by cutting off 1 inch with a straight cut and placing it into water. A tree shouldn't be left without watering the base for more than four hours.

Some experts say to hold a running hose



CAMMIE CLARK

The Hearst Drive home of Malcolm and Sandee McNeil has many beautifully decorated Christmas trees on display. The secret to keeping a live tree healthy in your home is water, water, water.

over the tree trunk while it is being cut, claiming this makes the difference between a tree that is fresh for two or three weeks and one that can last for two months. The life of the tree depends on the species as well as its care.

Before moving the tree indoors, also trim any low limbs to accommodate the presents and decorations that will go underneath; some tree lots will do this for you.

After cutting, quickly move your tree indoors and into the stand and immediately add water. The stand should hold at least 1 gallon; check it after your tree drinks its fill and be sure it is two-thirds full and the base of the tree is always covered. Forget the myths about adding aspirin, Sprite or Alka-Seltzer — just add plain water.

For easier watering, you can buy a funnel and a long tube to insert over the funnel and into the tree stand. Adjust it so you can add water without bending over for the greatest watering ease, then hide the funnel and tube in the foliage.

If you've had a problem with falling trees, perhaps due to enthusiastic children or pets, you may want to install a hook on the ceiling right above the tree and secure it with clear fishing line. The hook is to give the tree stability, not to support it.

Keeping the tree cool will help prevent the shedding of needles so avoid placing it near a heater vent. But a tree does benefit from light so it is good to place it near a window where it will receive sunlight. Even the tree lights are beneficial.

If your tree does dry out, remove it before it becomes a fire hazard. Lights and electrical chords should be checked ever year for fraying; miniature lights produce less heat than standard bulbs, reducing the drying of the branches and chance of fire. White LED lights are best to decorate the tree because they give off less heat.

Check the stand's water after the first three hours; you'll probably need to give it more water. For the first day or so, water your tree at least three times a day, then check it daily after that.

The more water stress a tree is suffering, the less fragrance it emits. And isn't that what a fresh Christmas tree is all about?

— Dolores Fox Ciardelli



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## Creative packaging carries the holiday spirit

This year, make your wrapping and packaging as memorable as the gift itself. If you're mailing a package, use fillers that will hold the gift in place and add an element of surprise. Use your imagination to pick packaging fillers that will help build the anticipation of opening the gift, from houseware items to edibles.

Try the following suggestions to make your own unique holiday gift wrapping:

- Match a printed packaging tape to the theme of your present.

Available tapes include Cinnamon Snow or Reindeer Games.

- Wrap your gift with a gift. A cuddly baby blanket can cover a new toy or book. A decorative dishtowel can conceal a piece of new cookware and an inexpensive scarf can beautifully disguise a jewelry box.

- Wrap a present with pages from a gossip magazine or newspaper to help a student away at school stay current on the latest news, styles or their favorite celebrities.

- Use uniquely textured fillers such as colorful buttons, felt cutouts or crinkle fabric. A quick trip to a DIY home center or craft store can help spark your imagination and add sparkle to your gifts.

- Make your gift even sweeter with candy. Colorful M&Ms or Skittles will be an added bonus for any gift recipient with a sweet tooth.

- For environmentally conscious gift givers, go green and wrap your presents using eco-friendly shipping products such as recycled boxes made from renewable resources and biodegradable peanuts.

Be bold when decorating holiday packages this season. The added creativity is simple, fun, exciting and always appreciated.

—ARA Content



# Sweets bring joy to the world

'Tis the season to bake a plenty and treat your loved ones to the best desserts of the holidays. If you're a little more ambitious, you can even bake some delectable gifts to give.

It's nice to have tasty sweets on hand to serve with a cup of coffee or hot chocolate when friends stop by, to offer a neighbor something just as it comes out of the oven, or as an offering to de-stress your out-of-town guests as they wearily arrive from the airport. And, with a clear cellophane bag and some bright ribbon, a homemade holiday dessert becomes a charming hostess gift welcomed in any household.

To get yourself in the holiday baking mood, set the stage: Light some scented candles, start a pot of coffee and put on your favorite holiday music. Clear a large space so you can easily access all essential ingredients and supplies. Be sure to select a day with no other commitments so you can work without interruption. Consider inviting a friend to bake with you and share the final results. Whatever and whenever you bake, turn your work into a fun holiday event.

—By Jacqui Love Marshall, who lives in San Ramon with her pug, Nina Simone, and volumes of cookbooks. E-mail her at [jllovermarshall@yahoo.com](mailto:jllovermarshall@yahoo.com).



## Almond Haystacks (makes 16 to 18 clusters)

- 8 ounces bittersweet OR semisweet chocolate, chopped
  - 1-1/2 cups sweetened flaked coconut
  - 3/4 cup smoked almonds (about 5 oz.), finely chopped, or plain almonds
1. Line a baking sheet with waxed paper. Melt chocolate in a large heatproof bowl over a pan of hot water, stirring

frequently until melted and smooth. Remove from heat. Stir in 1 cup coconut and 1/2 cup almonds. Spoon the mixture in heaping tablespoon-size mounds onto waxed paper. Mix remaining 1/2 cup coconut and 1/4 cup almonds in a bowl and sprinkle over tops of haystacks, lightly pressing into chocolate to adhere.

2. Refrigerate until firm, about 1 hour. Store in an airtight container at room temperature up to 1 day, or in refrigerator up to 2 weeks.

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### Common signs of hearing loss include:

- You hear people speaking but you have to strain to understand their words.
- You frequently ask people to repeat what they said.
- You don't laugh at jokes because you miss too much of the story or the punch line.
- You frequently complain that people mumble.
- You need to ask others about the details of a meeting you just attended.
- You play the TV or radio louder than your friends, spouse and relatives.
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# Five ways to stay upbeat and energized during the holidays

As Christmas carols hit the airwaves and the temperatures begin to fall, the joy of the holidays brings out the best in everyone — right? With a seemingly endless to-do list of shopping, cooking, entertaining and decorating, the holiday season can quickly become a recipe for anxiety. A recent study by the American Psychological Association shows that one-third of Americans are living with extreme stress.

The true meaning of the holiday season can be overshadowed by the demands of preparations, but it shouldn't be. By planning ahead, taking care of yourself and making sure to spend quality time connecting with loved ones, you can stay upbeat and energized during the holidays.

Try these tips to make sure your mood is as bright as the lights on the Christmas tree.

■ **Plan ahead:** Instead of subjecting yourself to the last-minute trips downtown or to the mall, get shopping done earlier. Get to

stores early and have a list so you don't forget anything. Establish a schedule for the month of December and plan several days in advance for holiday meals and parties. Also, create a budget early in the season, and stick to it. Studies show that finances are often a major trigger of stress during the holidays.

■ **Make meaningful connections** the entire season long. Making time to connect with close family and friends — whether through a phone call, email or Skype — will help you remember the true meaning of the holiday season.

■ **Take time for yourself.** Go to a movie with a friend or curl up by the fire with a bestseller. Taking a moment to breathe and focus on something unrelated to the holidays will give you a chance to regroup and more effectively tackle the next cookie recipe or holiday party on your schedule. Try spending a few quiet moments of alone time each morning to recharge for the day ahead. And, if you feel like splurging, enjoy a few



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hours at the spa while you're picking up gift certificates for others on your list.

■ Avoid over-committing. With holiday parties to attend and host, cookies to bake and deliver, and buying gifts and sending cards, the holidays can easily swirl out of control. Only go to parties you truly have time for and enjoy so you'll be better able to savor the most important things of the holiday season when you're not frantically running from one commitment to another.

■ Exercise and eat right. In a season where schedules get busier as the holidays get closer, make one thing a standard in your daily routine. A trip to the gym or an exercise class helps you relax and unwind. If you can't make it to the gym, incorporate more walking into your daily routine. Park a little farther from the store entrance, or take a walk to see the neighborhood Christmas displays. Try to focus on your nutrition and avoid overeating, a major cause of holiday and post-holiday anxiety. Make sure to incorporate fruits and vegetables into your diet, and avoid that extra cookie — usually one is enough to satisfy your sweet tooth.

—ARA Content



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# Holiday lights make people smile

Decking the halls is alive and well in Pleasanton. Even the grumpiest Scrooge must smile at the festive decorations while driving through the city in December — from the charming downtown ornaments to the neighborhood displays, not to mention the mall with its Santa centerpiece.

The website [LightsoftheValley.com](http://LightsoftheValley.com) has been guiding folks toward the more spectacular exhibits since 1999 when Alex Dourov, a Livermore resident, set up the go-to guide for the Tri-Valley. It now includes much of the Bay Area, Northern California and the Central Valley but its entries for Pleasanton remain a valuable resource.

"It's about making people smile," Dourov said. "Not only the children, but also the adults."

At right, the home of Malcolm and Sandee McNeil on Hearst Drive makes the list every year.



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# Holiday entertaining can be easy and fun

Entertaining friends and family during the holiday season is as customary as drinking eggnog and opening presents. These gatherings usually involve investigating new — and delicious — recipes, decorating the house to the hilt, building the perfect collection of holiday tunes to play and finding fun activities to keep everyone engaged throughout.

The key to successful entertaining over the holidays is preparation. Mike Wisner, executive chef for kitchen appliance maker LG Electronics USA, has these tips:

■ The menu is one of the most important aspects of a holiday gathering. To keep everyone happy with each course, make sure you have something for simple and extravagant tastes. Cheese, sausages or cured meats and crackers provide you with plenty of options. Also be aware of your guests' food allergies.

■ Map out your meals a few days in advance and don't feel like you have to cook everything. Cold food items make great hors d'oeuvres. Decide when you want to eat, so you know when to start cooking (or unwrapping) each dish.

■ Do as much as you can to prepare in the days leading up to your party. Many food items

can be prepared days in advance and only need reheating before serving. Additionally, things like rolling napkins, decorating, and setting your gathering area can be done well ahead of time.

■ If you're hosting a gathering with children in attendance, be sure to have some fun movies on hand to keep them entertained. Consider throwing favorite holiday shows into the mix to keep the seasonal theme going strong.

■ Music is always an important element to hosting a successful holiday party. Be sure to make a few playlists beforehand and remember, keep the volume at a level where the music can be heard but you can still have a conversation.

■ Cleanup can be the worst part of hosting, especially since most people leave it to the end of the night. It's never a bad idea to clean as you go and use disposable serving items where appropriate. Finally, you'll find that many guests would be happy to lend a hand.

"Pulling off a fun and entertaining holiday party takes work and good planning," Wisner says. "But with the right preparation, friends and family will request an encore party next holiday season."

—ARA Content

## Simple make-ahead recipe: Prosciutto Wrapped Asparagus

### Ingredients:

1 bunch of asparagus  
1/2 pound thinly sliced prosciutto or serrano ham  
Extra virgin olive oil  
Balsamic vinegar

### Directions:

After removing one to two inches off the ends of the asparagus, cut into two- to three-inch lengths. Cook in a large pot of boiling water until they are "al dente." They should still have a slight crunch when bitten. When done, move them to a bowl of ice water to stop further cooking. Once chilled, remove and pat dry. Wrap each piece in a slice of ham (you can cut large slices in half). Store in an airtight container and refrigerate until ready to serve. These can be prepared up to two days in advance.

### To serve:

Remove the wrapped asparagus from the refrigerator an hour before serving to allow them to warm up. Preheat broiler on high for five minutes. Place the wrapped asparagus on a baking sheet and then in broiler until the tops are crisped, about two to three minutes. Flip over and repeat for the other side. Remove from the oven and arrange on a serving tray. Drizzle with a good quality extra virgin olive oil and balsamic vinegar.



—Chef Mike Wisner

# Photos help make personalized holiday gifts

Finding that perfect holiday gift for friends and family is always challenging, but one type of gift that will never go out of style is the personal, handmade present. A good start is to recall all your favorite memories by looking through the pictures you've taken throughout the year.

How many photos do you and your family take each year? Hundreds? Thousands? Unfortunately, many end up staying stored indefinitely on your camera or smartphone, your hard drive or in email attachments. Creating great gifts with those photos — right from home — is a snap, and the key is to start with great-looking photos printed on a high-quality printer.

■ **Make frames.** One of the easiest ways to get your kids involved in the gift making is frames. Start with Popsicle sticks — either colored sticks or the plain wood ones that they can color or paint on their own, and decide what size frame you want to make. You can also buy a frame with a large solid-colored mat around it so your children can decorate it, and you can simply put their photo in the middle — either are great gift ideas for parents and grandparents.

■ **Make fun collages.** With so many great

family memories from the year, picking just one picture to highlight can be a challenge. One great way to put more of those memories in the spotlight is by making a collage. It can serve as a wrap-up of your year and a perfect complement to your family's annual holiday card. Pick several really fun photos to cut out and lay the parts you want to use on a sheet of paper. Make sure you give the placement of the photos careful consideration before gluing it down to the paper or you'll have to start over.

■ **Share the holidays with friends and family from afar.** We all have friends and relatives who aren't close by. Take photos of your holiday dinner, your family opening gifts or decorating your home, and send them to your out of town loved ones so they can still be a part of your holiday festivities. After all, a picture is worth a thousand words.

Bright, quality pictures and a little creativity make wonderful gifts, and you can put them together right at home while taking a break from other holiday shopping and festivities.

—ARA Content

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