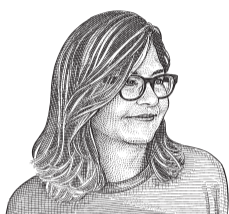


DESIGN & DECORATING



PAUL GARLAND

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DÉCOR / MICHELLE SLATALLA



Can a Wee Tabletop Tree Carry Off Christmas?

WHAT IS THE RIGHT size Christmas tree to fit a room? “The biggest damn tree you can fit through the front door,” my mother believed. To accommodate a massive Scotch pine dripping with silver icicle tinsel, she decorated the living room with what she called “placeholder furniture”—a lowboy cabinet and armless rocker which, every December, she moved to the basement.

Each year my father swore as he lugged a too-big tree into the house and got it into

place, but she pronounced it a “Christmas miracle.”

I consider myself more flexible on seasonal décor than my mother—who did not believe in fake trees, blinking lights or tree toppers other than angels with lacy wings. But every year I want a gigantic Christmas tree that requires the angel to hunch over, crunched against the ceiling.

My husband would prefer a smaller tree. “Don’t you think a tabletop tree looks classy?” he asks every year.

No, I do not. After decades

of marriage, however, I understand the value of avoiding a public fight in the middle of the pop-up Christmas tree lot next to the highway. So before we headed out this year, I sought professional advice about how to choose the right size Christmas tree.

First I phoned Doug Hundley, a spokesperson for the National Christmas Tree Association, which compiles annual statistics about the 32.8 million real Christmas trees purchased nationwide at an average of \$78 per

tree. (The association also compiles statistics about fake trees but, as my mother would say, who cares?)

“Do you have any statistics about the best size for a Christmas tree?” I asked Mr. Hundley.

“Totally up to you,” he said. “But I will say that by far the most popular size in the nation from coast to coast is a 6- to 7-foot tree.”

“That sounds sort of...small,” I said.

“Oh no, trees trick you. Outdoors they look smaller

than when you get them home,” he said.

Mr. Hundley recommends measuring before you buy. To determine optimal tree size, subtract at least 6 inches from a room’s ceiling height. For diameter, measure the available floor space. Then subtract 6 inches to avoid squashing branches against walls.

“You don’t want to be surprised by the size and say, ‘Oh gosh, we have to move the couch now,’” he said.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because you don’t,” he explained.

Seeking a second opinion, I phoned New York interior designer Harry Heissmann, a Christmas décor enthusiast known for his collection of antique tree stands. He has 250 of them.

“The tree you like best probably depends on what you remember from childhood,” said Mr. Heissmann, who grew up in Germany, where tabletop trees were the norm. “There was no such thing as a 10-foot tree. My grandmother had a perfect bay window area with a marble shelf where a tree would sit. There was a crèche below it with terra cotta figures, and it was just beautiful.”

“Do you try to re-create the look?” I asked.

“That would be impossible,” he said. “I live in a brownstone with no elevator. After Christmas I maneuver the tree down the stairs and take it to the garbage, and on the way it loses eight billion needles and you need a little vacuum to clean up, because neighbors are peeping through the keyhole.”

“How big is your tree?” I asked.

“Tabletop,” he said. “I feel you should make it easy on whoever has to get rid of it.”

That would be my husband. Suddenly I felt like Scrooge for subjecting my husband to a backbreaking

holiday season.

“Maybe I should get a smaller tree,” I said cautiously, just to try out the words.

Mr. Heissmann suggested a small tree on a side table (“a round table is a nice shape, easy to maneuver around”) covered with a green felt tablecloth (“cut to size with pinking shears”).

“It still has that wonderful smell of a real tree,” he said. “I like to decorate it the traditional way, with a tree topper and ornaments made of thin glass or iron and tin.”

“That sounds classy,” I said, wholly unconvinced.

Maybe, when it comes to Christmas trees, size matters. If it’s your tradition. Of course

I want a big one that crunches the angel against the ceiling.

I could hang the homemade ornaments I inherited from my mother on a tabletop tree. But wouldn’t it topple under the weight of the sequined sleighs, glitter Santas and Baby Jesus in an eggshell?

At the Christmas tree lot, I considered a 4-foot-high tabletop tree. Maybe there was a sad expression on my face.

“What are you doing?” my husband asked.

“This would look OK I guess on the hall table,” I said bravely.

“Like hell,” my husband said. “Let’s get the biggest damned tree that fits through the door. There’s an 8-footer over there that’ll likely pop the head off that old angel of yours.”

That’s when I realized that his tradition was to haul the tree into the house, wrestle in into the stand, sweep up dry needles and drag it to the curb. And he had finally gotten used to it.

It was a Christmas miracle.



THE ARRANGEMENT

FLOWER SCHOOL

The Hunt for Red December

Floral designer **Lindsey Taylor** takes her cues from a sanguine fin-de-siècle painting to create a festive crimson bouquet

FOR THE HOLIDAYS I was craving a very red arrangement. Conveniently, I came upon “Félix Vallotton, Painter of Disquiet,” an exhibit that will run through Jan. 26 at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. I was struck by the rich colors in the interiors depicted by the Swiss-born Mr. Vallotton (1865-1925), and I left the show determined to repaint all my rooms in deep vermilion and teal greens. As a less drastic compromise, I channeled my obsession with his palette into this month’s arrangement, choosing as my leaping-off point his “The Red Room, Etretat: Madame Vallotton and her Niece, Germaine Aghion” (1899), not only for its wealth of reds but as a wonderful example of his quiet voyeurism.

I selected a homey earthenware vessel, deep brown like the wood of Madame Vallotton’s chair. To reference the reds in the dress,



THE INSPIRATION

Roses and almost-open amaryllis echo the hues of Félix Vallotton’s “The Red Room, Etretat: Madame Vallotton and her Niece, Germaine Aghion” (1899).

walls, bedcover and carpet, I filled my vase with amaryllis, full roses, carnations and slightly pinker Heptacodium bracts. A sprig of light blue larkspur, with its black-centered flowers, perfectly mimicked the painting’s fireplace tile, and to weave in the green of Madame’s sash and the carpet, I plopped in seasonally appropriate sprigs of ever-

green sequoia, pivoted just so. Finally, I tucked in a single playful ballet-pink carnation under the other flowers to allude to the niece’s dress and the texture of her messy hair. I chose to cut all the stems short, so the blooms almost mashed together, tightly filling the vessel with the sort of intense intimacy the painting conveys.



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