



Chris Olsen decorates his home in West Little Rock in modern colors. Right: Olsen with his dogs, Fango and Eva.



refreshing CELEBRATION

LANDSCAPE DESIGNER CHRIS OLSEN UNITES HIS LOVE FOR CHRISTMAS AND OUTSIDE-THE-BOX IDEAS FOR A CHEERFUL RESULT

BY NANCY ELIZABETH DEMENT | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JANET WARLICK

Everyone knows the blond-haired, blue-eyed landscape designer with a gift for making art out of flowers and plants. Chris Olsen, garden guru and owner of Botanica Gardens in Little Rock, can take any plot of soil and turn it into a masterpiece. But on a cold winter day last December, I find his talents go way beyond green leaves and soil. In a striking display of color and innovation, Olsen achieves a Christmas look without falling prey to the typical red-green combo, overuse of garland, and presence of miniature Santas that creep out even the most adoring believers. Instead, the bungalow tucked away in West Little Rock showcases both traditional and modern styles, and classic and retro color palettes, proving that the flair of the holiday season only enhances this designer's abode.

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Olsen's lush outdoor spaces are as inviting as the indoor spaces. Views are not obstructed by drapes or dividers. Facing page: The master bedroom is a contemporary design with a French country influence.



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Olsen began toying with design and decorating at a young age. At thirteen, he took charge of the holiday decorating. "I just like it [decorating]," he says. "I get in the mood. . . . And while I love Christmas, fall really is my favorite. Pumpkins and gourds." But back to his home on this sweater day in December. Olsen's house, beginning with his front yard — a luscious garden accessed by a front gate and a winding path to the front door — is a spectacle. And a shame to miss. Perhaps that's why Olsen is an annual stop on half a dozen tours during the Christmas season. "I do the decorating for me. A home has to be a reflection of you," Olsen says. "But I like to share it with others." What amazes me is the unpredictability. I travel from room to room finding different color palettes and styles, some influenced by Olsen's past, others inspired by the year's trends.

The magical display in Olsen's master bedroom takes anyone back to his or her childhood. This was his intention. "At night I lie in bed and stare at the Christmas tree until I go to sleep," he says. "It reminds me of my childhood." The artificial tree is a near-perfect replica of a large, fat spruce. When Olsen was a small child growing up in Connecticut, he and his family would cut down their Christmas tree from a forest behind their house. As was the trend back in the day, the Olsons would string the tree with large multi-colored lights and dress it with silver tinsel. "I wanted to give it a homemade, down-home look," he says. "Just like how it looked when I was a kid." While the bedroom has a "traditional" or "old-fashioned" Christmas look, Olsen says, the style of the room is contemporary with hints of European antique.

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Left: The main feature in Olsen's living room is the suspended piece of glass, which he uses to hold a variety of colorful ornaments. Right: The decorative theme continues into the dining nook but with a lighter feel and lots of reflective surfaces.

A sleek wooden bed accented with a silk panel inset on the headboard faces wooden floors made from planks found in abandoned Arkansas shacks. The juxtaposition continues with the mantel and French doors sanded and painted to look like aged pine next to circular mirrors of different sizes above the bed. The large bedroom succeeds in two big ways: It acts as a great place to gather during parties — for large parties Olsen removes the furniture and has tables brought in to give it a very French chateau feel, he says — and it's a relaxing retreat for Olsen after a long day's work at Botanica Gardens.

"The bedroom is my favorite room in the house," he says. "It's so cozy and warm. I love the way sunlight comes through the French doors in the morning."

Olsen's home is free of any curtains or blinds. With his perfectly landscaped yard — complete with a meditation garden outside the bedroom and pool beyond the living room — it would be wrong to cover up the view.

In the home's main living area, rust-colored flames burn high in the fireplace, providing warmth among the cool-colored fabrics and decorations. The Christmas flair transforms the living room, but does not stray from the home's style — a soothing contemporary designed by Olsen and good friend Kevin Green four years ago. Green and blue ornaments on the mantel and small table-top tree blend with the staples of the room — a large gray sofa, green accent pillows and paintings of oceanic colors that fill the walls. Look up and you'll find the most daring, unusual Christmas decoration in Arkansas,



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maybe the South. Blue and green ornaments of all shapes and sizes sit atop a suspended piece of glass hanging from the tray ceiling by four metal rods. They remain still, as if stuck to the spot Olsen gave them. Amazing, considering there's no glue or tape holding them in place. I walk on my tiptoes when crossing under the suspended art piece. Olsen doesn't seem the least bit concerned. "You can have a beautiful house and it still be liveable, useable," he says. "My nieces and nephews run around and I'm not worried about them breaking anything."

In the nearby dining nook, Olsen has continued the color scheme but emphasizes

sparkle. The frosted glass table is centered by tea lights surrounding a row of yellow orchids; a large round light fixture glows like a snow ball on fire; and tiny candles hanging from the chandelier flicker when someone passes. A large wall mirror amplifies all the flicker and flash.

I return to the hub of the home and plop down on the sofa, in front of the fire. Behind me, the indoor fountain rushes, like a stream after a spring rainstorm. Between the fountain's steady flow, the warmth of the flames, and the giddiness that comes with the approaching holiday, all I need is a hot toddy to settle in for the afternoon ... and perhaps a long winter's nap.

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