Joe Richinelli chooses a holiday color scheme that complements his home's permanent palette. Here, his tabletop is accented with a variety of amaryllis, roses, and Christmas greens — and flickering votives. "Candlelight is a must," says Richinelli, shown, facing, with his Shetland sheep, Annie and Jenny.

BY PATTI VERBANAS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEITH SCOTT MORTON

THERE'LL BE

Parties for Hosting...

YES, HOLIDAY DECORATING AND ENTERTAINING *CAN* BE A STYLISH AND SIMPLE AFFAIR.

DESIGN EXPERT
JOE RICHINELLI SHOWS
YOU HOW TO KICK OFF
THE WINTER SEASON WITHOUT
LOSING YOUR COOL.

EVERY HOLIDAY, I CHANNEL THE SPIRIT OF MRS. CRATCHIT FROM CHARLES DICKENS' *A Christmas Carol*. Remember the scene? Her family gathers around the table — spartanly festive in bows and candles — waiting in breathless anticipation for her celebrated pudding. She emerges, flushed, from the kitchen with the dessert, adorned by a modest sprig of holly, to gasps of excitement and applause. Hers is a celebration made of simple items and a table filled with love.

Such a dinner sounds like an easy aspiration, but somehow parties always manage to become more complex as the date draws near, and I fall into the trap of over-decorating ("Just one more bit of sparkle!") or over-spending ("I need to buy a centerpiece!"). By the eve of the event, I fret that my entertaining plans have become less Cratchit-inspired and instead teeter on the verge of becoming the Christmas dinner attempted by the Parker family in *A Christmas Story*: The father ultimately scraps the whole deal and takes everyone out for Peking Duck.

I know my scenario is not unique. Since we're on the cusp of yet another holiday, I decided to call on Joe Richinelli, owner of the Garden Shop in Upper Montclair who is known for his inspired holiday decorating and entertaining advice, to guide us all back to the spirit of celebrating in elegant simplicity.

"First, take into consideration how you entertain," Richinelli says. "Focus on the most highly visible areas; don't try to adorn every fireplace." In his home, Richinelli zeroes in on the front hall, kitchen, and dining room. "When people enter my house, the dogs are there, so they linger," he says. "I like to greet guests with a sensual treat like a floral or

"I MAKE THE TABLE A BIG BUFFET, WHICH SERVES A DOUBLE PURPOSE: IT LOOKS NICE AND IS PRACTICAL."

Selecting a simple color palette allows Richinelli to highlight, not overwhelm, his collection of paintings depicting the Hudson River Valley (above). He garnishes the buffet (facing) with the same herbs he used in his menu — here, rosemary, bay laurel, and parsley. The sprigs' scent heralds the meal to be enjoyed.

greenery arrangement and scented candles or potpourri."

Although guests congregate in the kitchen, Richinelli keeps decorations here to a minimum, preferring just to display his favorite serving pieces and tureens. "I make the table a big buffet," he says, "which serves a double purpose: It looks nice and is practical."

In the dining room, he drapes garland around the mirror and adorns it with his favorite vintage Italian angel sculptures. Repurposing cherished collections and presenting them in novel arrangements is an inspired way to personalize your decor — and not overextend yourself. For example, Richinelli gathers his collection of antique red hatboxes that are typically displayed singly throughout the house and masses them under the front hall table. "They look good together and pull in a holiday theme," he explains. "These are pieces I see in only one way during the year, but they have more impact when grouped in a high-focal area."

Ornaments, like Christmas balls, can likewise be enlivened when displayed in bowls. "Most people already own these items, and placing them in the glass transforms them into pretty jewels," Richinelli says.

Bringing nature indoors is another easy tactic for achieving a holiday look. "One of the nice things about Christmas is that it relies heavily on greens, which most people can obtain in their back yards," Richinelli says. "You can clip from boxwood, yews, and pine trees and then add flora." The greens last through the month, which is helpful if you want to decorate in early December and have arrangements keep until New Year's Eve. Richinelli supplements greenery with fresh flowers throughout the month and increases the volume for the grand finale of Christmas week.

Lighting and scents are other simple ways to create atmosphere. "Place dimmers on chandeliers and lamps, and then add candles and lots of votive lights," Richinelli says. He recommends using scented candles in areas where no food is being served and unscented candles in the kitchen and dining room. "When people walk in the front door,

Lucas, a Wheaten Terrier, holds court in the library (above). "The room has a lot going on in it," Richinelli says, "so I accent it simply." Guests are welcomed by greens, flowers, and candles in Richinelli's entry hall (facing). "People pause there, so I like to greet them with something fragrant," he says.

I like the house to smell clean with some woodland smell like fresh pine," he says. "Or you can add a bit of nostalgia with cinnamon or spicy fragrances — anything that has punches of baking scents in it. Guests will respond to that."

As with interiors, Richinelli considers focal points and simplicity for exterior embellishments. "A decorated front door is welcoming and appropriate," he says. "I also like candles in the windows. Buy electric ones with light sensors that turn on at dusk and shut off at dawn."

Homeowners tend to limit their exterior decorating to the front door, he notes — and miss a grand opportunity. "People want their exteriors to look festive but they forget that once they or their guests are in the house, no one sees the outside. Decorate for *your own* enjoyment," he says. "I hang a wreath on the sheep shelter in my back yard. Though you can't see it from the road, you can see it from my living room. When I have my coffee in the morning, I enjoy looking out at it. Pay attention to structures like garage doors, fence posts, or gates that are prominently viewed from high-traffic windows. And all you need is a wreath and a bow."

Finally, Richinelli suggests playing lively, contemporary music as the guests arrive, then transition to soft instrumentals during dinner so as not to overpower conversation. Toward the evening's close, play tunes that evoke nostalgia, perhaps your favorite holiday carols that will inspire your guests to leave your home humming. *Hurrah!* Now *that's* a celebration Mrs. Cratchit would applaud.

The simplicity of candlelight is the best accent for Richinelli's 19th-century home (top). Repurposing holiday decorations (Christmas balls, left, and antique decorative Italian angels, facing), allows guests — and the homeowner — to look at them in a whole new way.