

Alternative seasonal décor
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I'll warrant that none of us are wholly immune to peer pressure. My breaking point came last year when visitors from overseas condemned me for living in Canada and having a fake tree. Buying a faux tree (let's never say fake in relation to my possessions,) wasn't exactly my No. 1 choice, but it was a rare occasion when practicality prevailed.

You see, I live in apartment, in downtown Toronto and I use transit. The obstacles to buying a tree, getting it home and then disposing of it quickly add up. At the same time, I would pine ruefully as I thumbed my way through Martha's Christmas magazine edition, looking at those fabulous specimens, from Noble to Nordmann Firs . So, when that faux tree came down last year, I decided to toss it. For 2007, I was going to make Martha proud.

Except now it's December and the practical concerns are again at the fore of my mind. Seriously, am I going to take my 8ft tree on the subway? And yes, I hear you thinking: Why not get a smaller 4ft tree? Well I have a seemingly arbitrary, but nonetheless steadfast, rule: People cannot be taller than Christmas trees.

There are plenty more legitimate reasons not to get a tree. Perhaps you live in a tiny space and don't really want a tree hogging the room. Or maybe you're visiting family for the holidays so just want a few seasonal touches to get you through parties, instead of the full kit and caboodle.

Not having a tree doesn't make you Scroogey McGrinch. The key for me is that my place must still be festive and fun. And I want to make use of all those fabulous ornaments I've collected, stolen from my mother and crafted over the years. So here's my non-tree alternative scheme:

(1) Boughs, holly and ribbons

You can bring the greenery, and the fragrant aroma, to your home with boughs of evergreen and the beautiful punch of red holly berries. Most florists sell boughs for creating garlands at this time of year. I laid great big boughs across my window-sill, interwoven with lights and baubles; all the "twinkliness" of the tree, without the overwhelming scale. Floral wire will help keep everything in place. Wreaths are, of course, a classic and I love nothing better than seeing a wreath suspended in a window.

(2) Branches

I confess: I flat out ripped this idea off a blog called Housemartin [<http://housemartin.typepad.com/>], but we all know there's a fine line between imitation and inspiration. This talented blogger has filled urns with bare branches and suspended ornaments from them. I put my branches in glass hurricane lamps, filled with miniature glass balls. The branches themselves showcase some of my favourite ornaments. Because these are on my mantelpiece, the scale is impressive and the branches lend a lovely sculptural quality to the room.



CREDIT: Image courtesy of Housemartin,
<http://housemartin.typepad.com>

Ornaments can be hung from branches arranged on a mantel or windowsill, for a festive alternative to a Christmas tree.

(3) Plants

If you're adverse to the tree notion because you dislike cutting down trees and giving land over to tree farms, there are lots of other growing specimens that connote the holidays, but that you can bring into your home without the same destructive connotations. Amaryllis and poinsettia are two that stand out, but potted rosemary trees or boxwood topiaries are other alternatives.

(4) Statement-scaping

There's no doubt that the sheer scale of the tree makes a dramatic visual statement. Compensate for that by splurging on one large-scale decorative feature. For example, a large carved deer with a velvet ribbon and bell ties around its neck, is a charming and original addition. A few pieces like this and your space will sing Season's Greetings and provide you with an arsenal of reusable items to build future traditions upon.

(5) Stockings

In my mind, you can lose the tree, but never the stockings. And you don't need a fireplace to hang them from: Try a bookcase, staircase or bed post. I found an adorable mini-socking and hung it in front of a mirror with a garland on top. In my mind, the more stockings there are, the greater the odds somebody will sneak something in one of them. An elderly gentleman in my building hung one on his door and I wrapped a big bar of chocolate with a satin red ribbon and a card from Santa. Who wouldn't love to be on the receiving end of that?

(6) Twinkle, twinkle

One main reason we love trees is the twinkling lights. I think the suggestions listed above make it possible to have sparkle and glitz by using ornaments and foliage in creative ways. But you can also keep the lights. Wrap your garland in Christmas lights. And create a safe space for burning basic pillar candles en masse. Add crystal or mercury glass to the setting and you'll keep the twinkle, with none of the shedding needles.