

Columnist discovers holiday-house secrets

By Esther C. Baird

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I realize that there are many stressful things during the holidays: Gift lists, family road trips, children's Christmas programs and what have you. But one thing that really consumes me is the house on route 62 just before 128 with the zillions of holiday decorations. You know the one.

When it's Valentine's Day there are hundreds of hearts; when it's Easter there are eggs-a-plenty. Driving by on at least a daily basis I can't help but wonder where, in their small cape, do the owners store the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of decorations. How do they decide which holiday warrants lawn ornamentation? And of course the biggest question — when do they decorate?

By all reports, no one ever sees them in action. Valentine's Day turns into St. Patrick's Day overnight. Thanksgiving becomes the Christmas carnival in the blink of an eye. Large, unwieldy signs, statues and plastic thingamajigs all float off into some storage netherworld and are replaced with nary a witness on hand. Are they insomniacs? Do they employ a bevy of lawn gnomes to surreptitiously do the work?

Thankfully, a home tour laid these questions to rest. The Christmas holiday is so extensive that their lawn and house exterior simply don't provide a large enough palette. The decorative party spills inside and for four days they owners open to the public for free.

Last Friday my daughter and I took the tour.

Imagine Willy Wonka's chocolate factory, only think Christmas, and then squeeze it into the downstairs of a small Cape. The front room alone was full, and I mean chock full, of thematically decorated Christmas trees. "After the first few years I realized if I moved my couch out of the living room I could fit in three more trees!" said owner Karen McCarthy.

Indeed!

McCarthy, who lives in the home with her fiancé, then proceeded to give us a delightful tour of her creations. In the front room she had the American tree, the Bird tree and the Old Fashioned tree just to name . . . a few. Other than the small forest of specialized trees, there were trains running around the trunks, moving angel-bunnies with violins, crafts that whirred, blinked and played festive music, and oh, about 50 Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls bursting out of a garland-strewn steamer trunk.

It was astonishing. My toddler daughter agreed. When we entered the house, rather than touching all the blinky, sparkly things, she froze. "Whoa!" she exclaimed, and sank to her knees in the middle of the room — and onto one of the two Christmas-themed rugs.

After the front room, we headed into the back bedroom, passing the Starry Night bathroom on the way.

"I covered the ceiling with black cloth and then affixed the twinkle light stars," explained McCarthy, as my daughter and I looked up at the night sky above the toilet.

"It's night night in here!" shouted my daughter, clearly on board with the theme.

I was most impressed with the giant Star tree, covered in rustic golden stars that burst out from the bathtub corner. It was bedazzling since all the stars twinkled doubly at us from the bathroom sink mirror.

McCarthy then led us into her room where the Cat and Dog Tree, the Santa Tree, the Angel Tree and the always-festive Hydrangea Bush Tree dwarfed her bed.

McCarthy also had beautiful quilts on the walls, cross-stitch hangings and more artsy creations than you could shake a, well anything at, to be honest.

We sidled into the kitchen, careful not to knock into the lovely and large Fruit and Veggie Tree. The countertop was set up for guests – lots of them in fact. There were piles of cookies, candy and other nibbles alongside more decorations including a giant hanging swan.

I asked, eyeing all the food. “How many people do you expect to visit?” McCarthy answered. “Well last year we had 1,400 visitors.”

I was stunned. I could hardly imagine 1,400 people walking down my block, let alone traipsing through my home.

Finally we stepped down into the foyer that contained the gigantic Bear Tree. While all the other trees in her home were real trees with thematic ornaments, the Bear Tree was literally constructed with teddy bears staring out at us in circular rows ascending at least nine feet. Not to be outdone, in the other corner stood the Frosty-the-Snow-Man Tree complete with arms and legs should he come to life — perhaps to find a less-competitive corner.

The door from her foyer to her garage was open and yet again full of floor-to-ceiling decorations, including many of her creations, which were for sale should you be gripped with the Christmas spirit after having just walked through her home.

The jolly, older man sitting in the corner to assist with purchases made browsing easy. McCarthy introduced him as her father, Bill McCarthy. He clearly loved his role in the grand decorating scheme and McCarthy said that her house holiday obsession began when the two of them would visit New Hampshire to take the holiday-home tours. She added in extreme understatement, “I’ve just always liked collecting things.”

On our way out through the foyer, I could see her back deck. McCarthy had a tribute to Rockefeller Square complete with an ice-skating rink. But it was what was beyond the deck that grabbed my attention. In the middle of the back lawn stood a massive shed.

“Aha!” I exclaimed. “That’s where you keep all your decorations isn’t it!”

“Well yes,” McCarthy said, a bit startled by the ferocity of my question. “It’s just that we always drive by and wonder where you stash them all, or,” I paused, wondering if she’d reveal her trade secret, “when you put them up. Just tell me, no one needs to know, except for the fact that I write for the paper. Do you have insomnia?”

McCarthy laughed.

“Nope, it just takes one day to swap out holidays.”

“But we never see you. Do you have a night job and tend to be awake at, say, 3 am?”

“Actually, I’m a flight attendant,” McCarthy replied and insisted that they’ve decorated in broad daylight — for 13 years! — on all their holidays, which by her list included: Valentine’s Day, St. Patrick’s day, Easter, the Fourth of July, Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas.

With all the secrets revealed, and a cookie or two in hand, our tour was complete. McCarthy was a wonderful host as I’m sure many of you already know. And I know that I will have one less holiday stress to consume me. There are no secret lawn gnomes, just a homeowner with a big shed and an even bigger creative spirit.

Esther Baird is a Beverly resident. Her column appears regularly in the Citizen. With suggestions or comments about The Baird Facts please contact Esther Baird at: esther@estherbaird.com, or visit her Web site at www.estherbaird.com.