

FROM GI HANGOVERS: Keep your cool to stay in control

Uninvited guests

They show up unannounced with their toddler and two Great Danes. You answer the door in your bathrobe. Do you invite them in, or tell them to get lost? 'Tis the season to welcome friends and family into your home — within limits. Although eating, drinking and making merry is more fun with a crowd, it loses its lustre if the in-laws invite themselves for Christmas and stay through New Year's.

Calgary etiquette expert Sue Jacques and the Herald's Savvy Host columnist Dona Johnson offer tips for dealing with uninvited visitors.

1. The surprise holiday pop-in: If you have plans or it's not a good time for company, be honest and suggest getting together at a later date, says Jacques. (Note to those prone to springing pop-ins on unsuspecting friends or family: call ahead.)

If you do invite the interlopers in, be sure to have on hand the "three Ss" — something to snack on, something to sip and something to socialize about.

2. Christmas crashers: As for the sister who calls a week before the holiday fishing for an invite, Johnson says there should always be "some room at the inn."

"This sort of hospitality . . . is the heart of Christmas spirit. Put another log on the fire, set another plate at the table, and unfurl the hide-a-bed. But let them know you've got a previous commitment on Boxing Day."

Jacques says it's absolutely OK to put date and length-of-stay limitations around someone's visit.

3. Guest room at the ready: Alas, no straw manger for your least-favourite uncle. Jacques advises putting together a guest basket that includes reading material, a sweet and a savoury snack, plus a travel-sized lotion, soap and toothpaste.

Vexing visitors

It's hard enough handling the mother-in-law's cooking advice on Christmas morning. But how do you deal with a vegan diner or a toddler who thinks the Christmas tree is the best toy ever?

Courtesy connoisseurs Isnor and Jacques impart these ideas.

1. Children who run amok: Brief parents and kids on your home expectations when they walk through the door, Isnor says.

"I have no problem telling a child that's not mine, in my house, what my rules are."

She says it's wise to child-proof by moving breakables or prized possessions out of reach.

And no, if a curious tyke keeps taking ornaments off the tree, it's not OK to send the culprit to the naughty chair. Instead, "change the situation," Isnor says. Put on a DVD or redirect the child to an age-appropriate toy or game.

2. Difficult diners: Between the turkey, stuffing, veggies, cranberry sauce and buns, Christmas dinner has something for everyone. Vegetarians should be able to assemble a nice meal.

Guests with allergies should inform the host in advance so the stuffing, for example, won't contain oysters if seafood is deadly for some guests.

If children will be in attendance, Isnor suggests serving dinner buffet-style, so parents can serve up their kids' plates.

3. The drunk uncle (drunk): If one of your holiday guests has a tendency to over-indulge, Jacques recommends establishing in advance how much — if any — alcohol will be served. Another option is to put away the wine after dinner and offer tea or coffee.

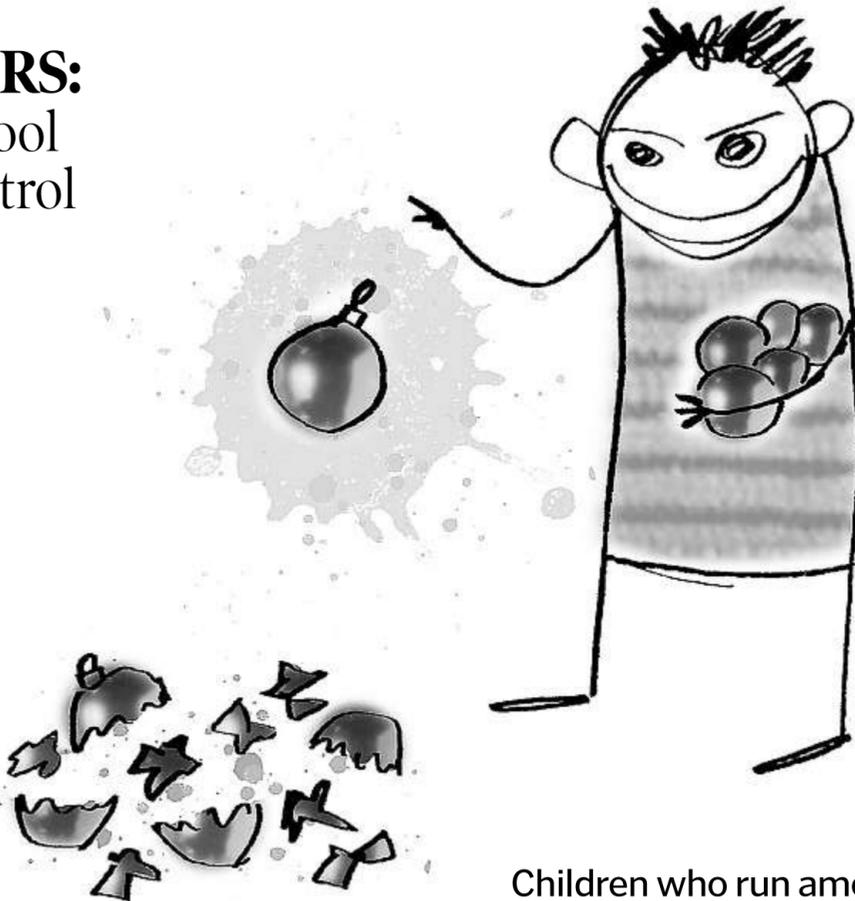
Whatever happens, be a responsible host. "If uncle Jack is hammered, we need to make sure that he doesn't get in a car and drive," Jacques says.

Ideally, if the drunkle knocks back too many rum-spiked eggnogs, there'll be a water- and Advil-stocked guest room waiting.

Spills and stains

It's inevitable.

A glass of red wine, a spoonful of cranberry sauce, a cup of eggnog



Children who run amok

Brief parents and kids on your home expectations when they walk through your door. Child-proof by moving breakables or prized possessions out of reach.

If a curious tyke breaks ornaments from your tree, it's not OK to send the culprit to the naughty chair. Instead, put on a DVD or redirect the child to a toy or a game.

will spillover at some point during your holiday celebrations.

Once you're done panicking, Linda Penton of Royal Cleaners and Parviz Somji of Randells Fine Drycleaning spoon up this advice.

1. Blot, don't rub: In the frantic effort to save the fancy tablecloth from a growing puddle of red wine, the first instinct is to grab a paper towel or cloth and rub at it. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

"That takes the colour out in the area," Somji says.

Instead, gently blot the stain with a dry cloth. And it's a myth that club soda will clear red wine, Somji says. It'll only help set the stain.

2. Match the treatment to the fabric and spill: There are so many permutations here, it's best to look up a reliable guide online or turn to a book such as Martha Stewart's Home-keeping Handbook.

For example, greasy stains such as butter or chocolate should respond to a solution of Sunlight dish detergent and hot water, Somji says. But certain fabrics will be damaged with heat. Egg or other protein stains will cook in hot water and become harder to remove.

3. Leave it alone: Perhaps the simplest advice of all is once you've blotted what you can, leave the rest to the professionals. Dry cleaners have an arsenal of stain-busting products at their disposal, and the know-how to deal with tricky fabrics.

"If you're not sure and don't know what to do, don't do anything," Penton says. "It can be treated at a later date."

Tree troubles

O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, why must you shed so very much?

There's only one thing worse than a Christmas tree left forlorn and empty of presents after the unwrapping is done — the trail of needles and sappy water it leaves on the way out the door.

Thankfully, proper care can minimize the mess, say Cara Pagnucco of Sunnyside Greenhouses Ltd. and Craig Belway of Spruce It Up Garden Centre. Here's their take on keeping needles under wraps.

1. Water often: Never let the level of water in the reservoir fall below the tree trunk, Belway says. A dry tree means dry needles that are prone to falling off.

Water your tree every day or as often as needed, right up until the time you take it down. Plain water will do, Belway says. "If you keep them well watered, the needle loss should be minimal."

2. Bag it: Spruce It Up sells giant Christmas tree garbage bags for \$2.49 each.

Problem is, they need to be laid down on the floor before you set up the tree. Then, when it's time for takedown, you simply remove all the decorations, wrap the bag up around the tree and carry it outside — needles and water enclosed. Once you're outdoors you can cut a slit in the bottom of the bag to take out your stand.

3. Plastic wrap: Lay plastic on the floor underneath the tree to help contain the needles that fall off when you're taking decorations down, Pagnucco suggests.

If you haven't bagged the tree and have to carry it outside the door au naturel, wear gloves to avoid getting sap on your fingers, and be careful not to get any on the walls or furniture.

Ideally, if the tree has been well watered, you won't leave a path of needles behind.

Corral the decor

Finally, it's all over. The relatives have gone home, the kids have grown tired of their new toys and you've got a spare five pounds around your middle.

Nothing left to do now but take down the lights, pack up the ornaments, put away the gift wrap, find a place for the garlands and stockings and wreaths and don't forget to remove the rest of the Christmas-only accessories and redecorate.

Being organized can make these tasks a touch simpler. Just hear out professional organizer Shannon Grams of A Place for Everything.

1. Wrapping woes: This is the time of year when stores sell storage containers specifically for rolls of wrapping paper. Invest now and you'll use them forever to keep not just rolls but sheets of gift wrap, bags and accessories neat and tidy, Grams says.

You could also store all of the above in long, flat plastic containers that fit under the bed.

Once everything is in one place, you'll never again have to search the house for ribbons and paper and tape.

2. Pack it up right: How many times have you unpacked your treasured Christmas ornaments and found broken ones?

Avoid the heartbreak by wrapping them in tissue paper or bubble wrap and storing them in sturdy plastic containers.

"Sometimes you just want to get the tree down and put everything away, but take the time," Grams says.

Buy tissue and bubble wrap in bulk so you have it on hand when you need it.

Be sure to label the bins. Even Grams lost her children's stockings for two years because she couldn't remember where she'd put them. You only pull this stuff out once a year, so make it easier on yourself.

3. Pare down: Now is the perfect time to get rid of the popsicle stick ornaments your kids made years ago, the sparkling red and green balls and the dozen nutcrackers you display every year just because they're there.

"Start a donate box," Grams says. "If something doesn't suit your taste anymore, take it to charity."

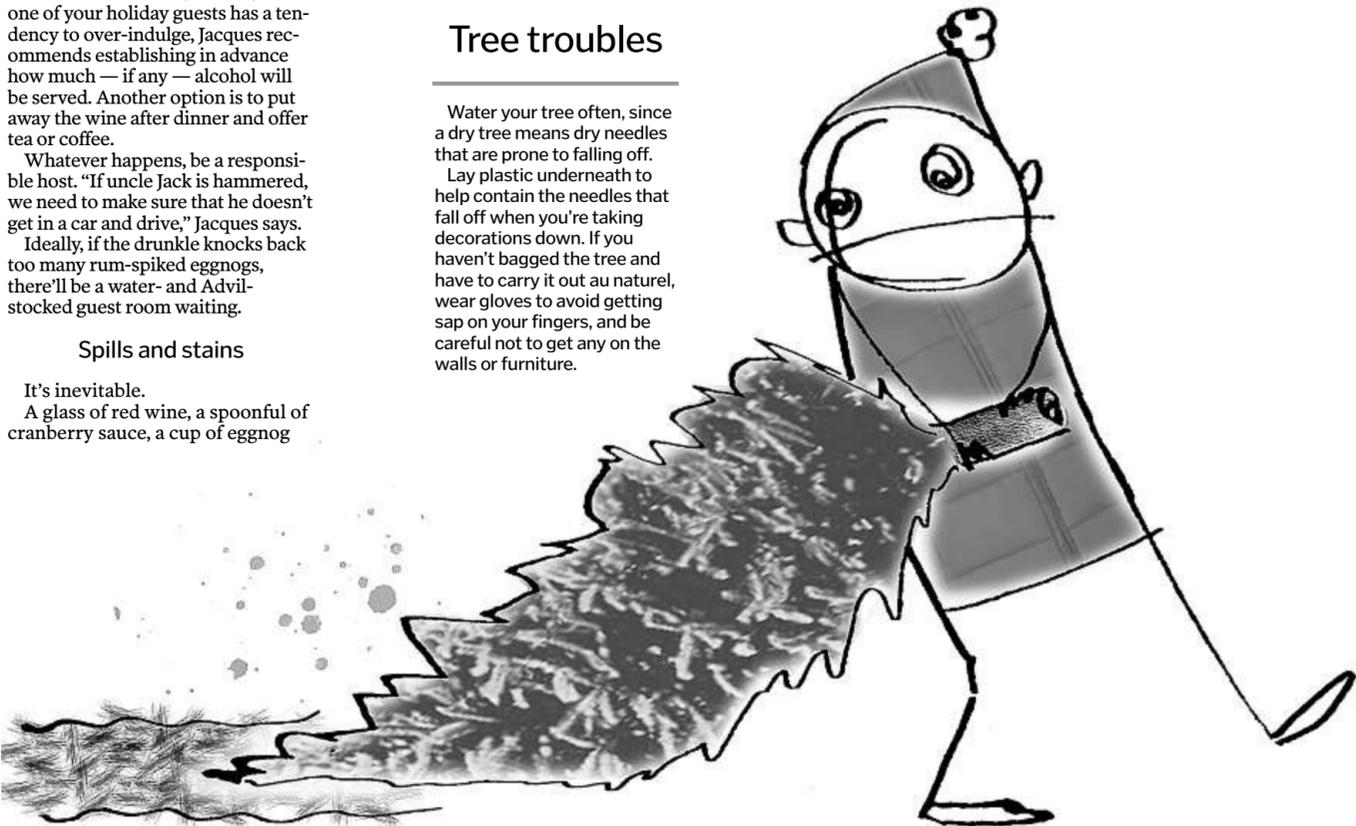
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Illustrations, Pierre A. Lamielle, Calgary Herald

Tree troubles

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ETIQUETTE

Party hosts drawing the line at red wine

LISA FITTERMAN
FOR CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

So there we were, attending a holiday dinner at my cousin Carolyn's beautifully appointed home. It was the first time we'd been invited, and it felt good to connect with little-known family.

I took the red wine. I always take the red wine. That is, unless the hosts, like certain anal relatives of mine, don't offer it lest it get on their precious white, or beige, or taupe carpets.

Obviously, Carolyn and her husband, Calvin, are not anal people. (Or they weren't at the time — but I'm getting ahead of myself.) I was seated on a chair, a plate of food balanced on my lap and the glass of wine firmly placed on an extremely stable side table.

Mr. Clumsy was seated next to me, happily chatting with our hosts' son when he underlined a point by throwing his arm out.

I'm sure you know what happened next. It was like a slow motion horror movie, with the wine splashing on me and on the white sofa. I was wearing wine red, so it didn't matter. The sofa was another story.

I tell you this because we're smack in the season of party hearty, with Hanukkah meals, Christmas cocktails, tension-fraught family dinners and those requisite New Year's dos packed chockablock over the next 10 days.

Such things as red wine, chocolate, beets and stiletto heels loom large as impediments to our property surviving the holidays intact. To that end, it's best to keep all guests in check, and not just those like Mr. Clumsy, no matter how sparkling and witty their conversation skills.

Call it defensive entertaining. I've been known to use an old sheet instead of a tablecloth. My aunt protects her burnished, perfect wood floors with rugs she bought at Costco. She insists they aren't cheap Costco rugs, but rather "special rugs" she happened to find at Costco. Whatever.

Then there's the other relative whom I promised not to name. (Twist my arm. It's my mom.) Suffice to say she's a clean freak who has bartenders at her parties quiz wannabe red wine drinkers as to their immediate future plans. If, for example, they plan to wander around a bit before settling down in one of the chairs provided, they are given gin, vodka or white wine. Red wine is a no-no.

Even better is the story I read in the New York Times recently, which detailed how defensive entertaining, or "extreme entertaining," as the story called it, is being taken to what some might consider outrageous lengths.

Ellen Breslow-Newhouse, for example, banned all red and/or brown food and drink from a party she recently held at her loft in Tribeca, where the colour scheme is beige, pale gold and caramel.

"I had freaked people out so much I found my guests were huddled in one little corner of the floor," Breslow-Newhouse told the paper. "They weren't standing on the rug, thank God."

Then there's advertising agency executive Richard Kirshenbaum, who admitted he requires guests to write a blank cheque to cover any potential damage if they want to drink red wine.

Finally, there's my favourite, John Yakubik, who works in marketing at Sony BMG. He told the Times he and his partner, Marc Berman, simply cover all wooden surfaces in plastic wrap — even those bits of their baby grand piano on which guests potentially can place glasses and other staining party paraphernalia. That is so . . . admirable in a really weird and sick way.

As for Mr. Clumsy, well, Carolyn was most gracious when I informed her of The Incident.

We temporarily blotted the stains with white tea towels. Two days later, she left me a message.

"Just to let you know, my marvelous cleaner came and got the stains out. You'd never know they were there. It was nothing."

Thanks Carolyn. And if you ever do invite us over again, a chastened Mr. Clumsy promises to speak softly and not carry on his big



DAVID PARKER

David Parker's column will return