

## French Lessons

Last December, in Paris for three weeks to help a friend-client redo her 1700s flat in a Kurdish-Turkish-Moroccan-French look, I decided to take a Christmas tree decorating seminar from the noted French floral designer, Christian Tortu. The class, held at a posh hotel, was a disappointment (his assistants “taught” the class, the trees kept falling, etc.), but I found Tortu’s small Odéon shop over-the-top beautiful. This was surprising to me because it didn’t have a single Christmas tree in it. I’m at the other end of the spectrum: Every year, I put up a dozen Christmas trees in my house including my Little Grove (left) in my living room, an aqua-and-pink tree in my dining room, a Snowman tree, a Santa Claus tree and a chartreuse tree in my chartreuse bedroom. As an interior decorator, I do other people’s trees, too. My final take on my seminar in Paris is that it was France’s answer to Americans’ yearning for French ideas for Christmas. In the spirit of Christmas present, I offer a private lesson for the holidays, whichever look you lean toward.

—Noelle Penn

### Pick a Look, Practice These Tips

#### American-Style:

◆ **Don’t skimp on the lights.**

Decorate your tree from the inside out, starting with lighting the trunk of the tree. To make a 7-foot-tall tree *really* have that Nutcracker sparkle, I use 40 boxes of 100 twinkle lights—4,000 of them—on it.

(Yes, surge-protectors are my friends!)

◆ **Don’t limit your ornaments to ornaments.**

I put everything in the world on my Christmas trees. Vintage earrings and old ribbon, antique postcards, nuts and berries look fabulous tucked in among *real* ornaments.

◆ **Get creative with your garland.**

Last Christmas I strung together white cotton balls; it cost nearly nothing and turned out to be the perfect garland for the Victorian tree I was creating.

#### Festively French:

◆ **Get beyond red and green.**

There wasn’t a single Christmas tree in Tortu’s shop, but his unarranged arrangements made the space feel festive. A huge wreath made entirely of pods covered the shop’s window outside. I’ll never forget the lushness inside the store: All the arrangements were in chartreuse, white, clear glass, silver and brown materials. They took my breath away.

◆ **Toss your marbles.** In Tortu’s shop, I saw hazelnuts in the bottom of glass vases instead of the marbles that we use. Here’s one stunning arrangement I’m going to borrow: Take large martini glasses, fill the stems of the glasses with hazelnuts and float a few gardenias on top.

◆ **Moss is boss.** Mosses were a big design element in Tortu’s shop—especially paired with zinc vases and silver urns. I’m the chartreuse queen; I loved seeing my favorite color all over the shop.

—N.P



“I call it my Little Grove,” says Portland decorator Noelle Penn of the three tall trees that she displays in front of the picture window in the living room of her Old Portland-style home.

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