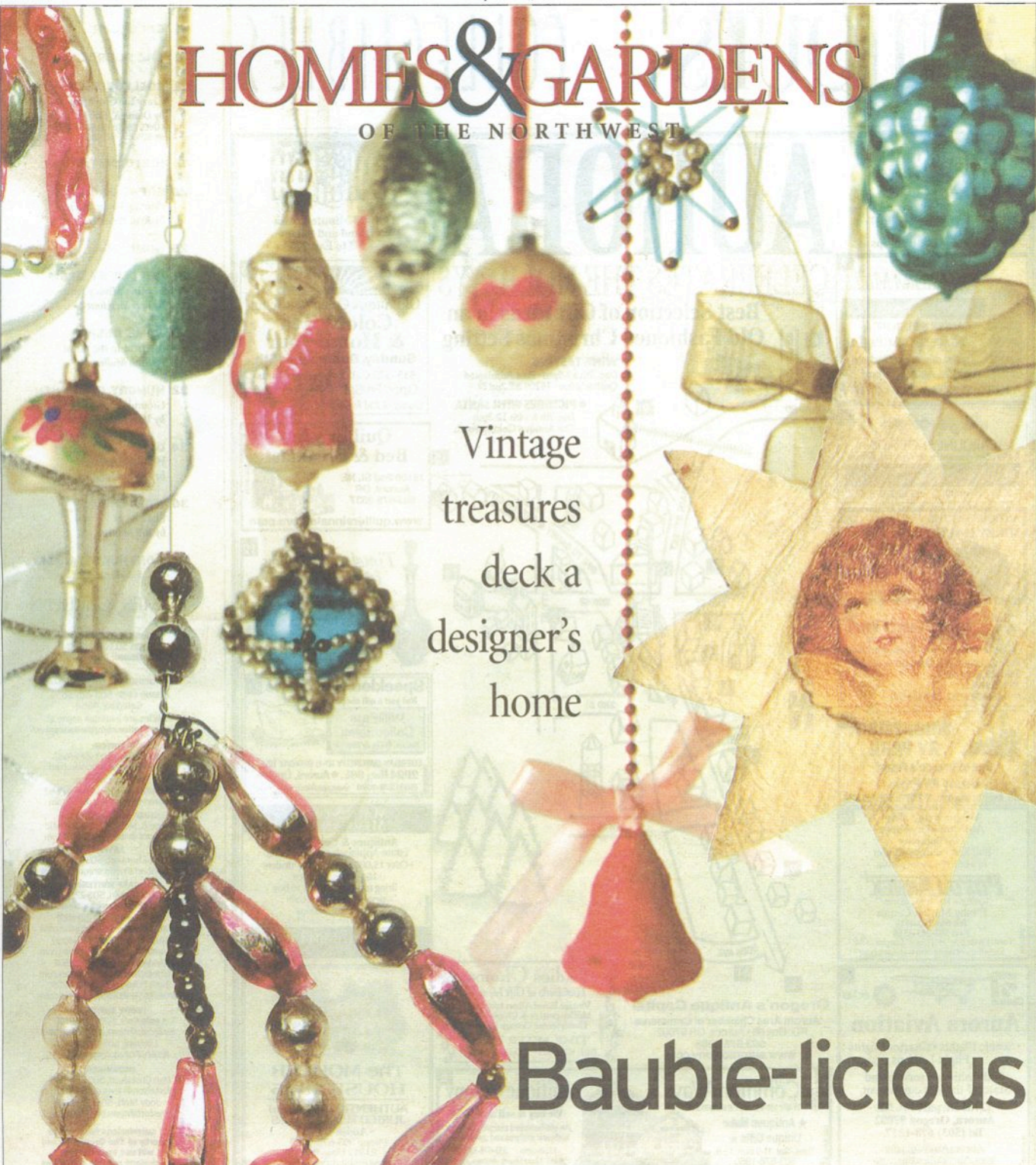


HOMES & GARDENS

OF THE NORTHWEST

Vintage
treasures
deck a
designer's
home

Bauble-licious



A designer's elaborate tree decor celebrates her holiday birthright

Joyeux Noël

By Diana K. Colvin ♦ Photos by Serge A. McCabe
THE OREGONIAN

Decorating a dozen or more Christmas trees is either holiday madness — or fate. Factor in a Dec. 10 birthday and a first name that multitudes sing with joy, and the scales tip toward fate.

Christmas is simply a big deal for interior designer Noëlle (born Noel) Penn. She was due Christmas Day; her parents chose her name far in advance. Being born before Christmas just means they could start celebrating sooner, she says. They encouraged her seasonal celebrity by proclaiming on their front door during the holidays, "NOEL lives here."

"I was indoctrinated," Penn says. Her childhood room was aflutter with collectible angel candleholders from family friends and relatives. She started collecting antique ornaments in her teens, abetted by her mother and aunt, who ran an antiques shop in Southeast Portland. She especially loved the Victorian decorations: "I had an affinity for them."

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Noëlle Penn says this tree is her favorite. Laden with nuts and berries, it stands in her downstairs hallway.





FROM PAGE 12

Her 12 trees nestle into kitchen corners, sit atop bookcases, stand next to a claw-foot bathtub, grace a bedside table, perch in her home office, and occupy prime real estate in the living room and dining room. Vintage ornaments decorate many. Their style fits perfectly in her Old Portland-style home in Sellwood.

"Your eyes just practically start spinning in your head when you see them," says Margaret Leach, a client and friend. "Every time you look at them you see something new" in the layers.

Even Penn's two cats have their own pink-and-green tree, decorated with — no, not birds and mice — but kitty ornaments.

Penn says it's difficult to choose a favorite ornament, or even half a dozen, from her collection, which numbers in the hundreds. "The ones that my mom gave me are the most wonderful," she says.

Sentiment aside, she'll point out favorites: squirrels, a fuchsia-pink glass slipper, flower baskets, turkeys and some antique mushrooms. Her most expensive ornament is a Victorian silvery-pink glass swan; she paid \$90 for it at an antiques shop in Aurora.

In her childhood, Penn recalls her parents creating elaborate crèche scenes and her father, Cy, ceremoniously lighting dozens and dozens of votive candles each evening, and later just as ceremoniously snuffing them. The musical accompaniment? Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby's Christmas albums.

"We had incredible trees when I was growing up. My dad would stand on ladders for hours putting on ornaments and icicles," she says.

Penn and her father shared an artistry

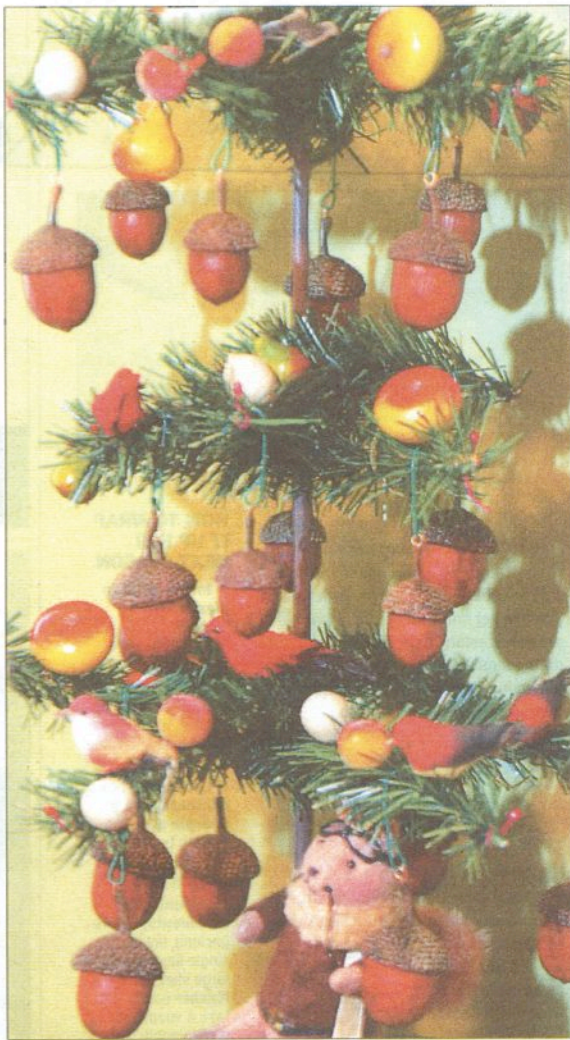
HOW TO WRAP IT UP FOR NEXT SEASON

- ◆ **Invest in large plastic boxes** — 36-by-24-by-24 inches. Line with bubble wrap.
- ◆ **Divide ornaments by color or theme.** Wrap individually in tissue and place in box.
- ◆ **Label each box's contents with a Sharpie pen.** The ink can be taken off with nail polish remover if needed.
- ◆ **For antique ornaments:** Before packing, lay in a single layer on a large sheet of white butcher paper and take a snapshot with a wide-angle lens. Then put each in a resealable plastic bag, wrap in tissue and place in box. Label box and tape photograph on top.
- ◆ **Store and label boxes** by tree or by type of ornament.



LEFT: Black, silver and periwinkle ornaments on a flocked tree echo the decor colors in Penn's office.

RIGHT: A simpler tree dangling with acorns and papier-mâché fruit sits in the downstairs bathroom.



that flowered at Christmas, says mother Jane Penn. Between them they'd vie to embellish the tree, moving ornaments around until they were satisfied, she says.

Penn has fond memories of the ritual and its climax: "We had a huge Christmas, with lots of family on Christmas Eve." Gifts under the tree for her and her siblings were wrapped in identical paper and color-coded ribbon — no names. It led to a lot of surreptitious present-foggling, she says.

Penn kept true to her name, even away from home. At Oregon State University, she decorated Christmas trees in her dorm rooms.

She looks back, amused, at her first "adult" tree. It was decorated

in the country style popular in the 1980s with bows, geese and Americana, in a condo in Sylvan. "It was one of the first trees I went hog-wild on," she says.

From there, she progressed to multiple trees.

"The problem was, I kept collecting ornaments that wouldn't fit on the tree, so I'd have to buy another tree. Then I wouldn't have enough ornaments to fill that tree so I'd buy more ornaments ..."

To this day she still "accidentally" buys ornaments, if not for herself, then for others. "There's always room for one more."

She went through a phase in her 20s of hating antiques and packed away her vintage ornament collection. There was a jewel-tone peri-

od, she recalls, before she resurrected her collection.

As if her personal trees aren't enough, she also decorates her mother's tree — her father died in 1984. And she designs trees for clients.

Because decorating her home for Christmas is a major undertaking, she begins in September and uses mostly pre-lit artificial trees "and lots of pine spray."

"If I had a team of slaves to put them up the night before Christmas, I'd do live trees," she says. She compensates by having fresh wreaths and garlands throughout the house.

Two trees — the ones in guest bedrooms — stay up year-round. "Everyone loves them," she says.

"To me, they're like a piece of art."

The other trees stay up until February or so. "I eventually get so much ridicule that I take them down." And if decorating is a labor of love, undecorating them requires equal commitment: It takes a day per tree.

So she's kept her family tradition evergreen.

There's one regret: "Too bad my dad didn't live long enough to see all my trees," she says. ♦

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Penn's mother gave her several antique Santas over the years. This one hangs on a red-and-white-theme tree in an upstairs bedroom.



A 1950s pixie made in Japan graces a red-and-white tree in a guest bedroom.



Papier-mâché snowmen chill out atop a cabinet in the upstairs hallway.

Garden-theme ornaments, birds and birdhouses adorn a tree in the dining room. Penn uses artificial trees because she decorates so many and likes to leave them up through winter.



TREE TRIMMING, A LA NOËLLE

When deciding on a theme for a tree, Noëlle Penn considers colors in the decor, or the theme of a room.

Penn prefers a richly layered tree. To achieve the look, she starts with thousands of tiny clear lights and weaves them through the inside branches of the tree, along with any ribbons and garlands to be used.

"That gives it depth." Then ornaments go on from the top down, to avoid breakage. Often the topper goes on last.

RIGHT: A feather tree in a guest bedroom follows a pink-and-green theme. It includes several cat ornaments in honor of Penn's pets. The tree topper is part of a German porcelain powderpuff doll.



ABOVE: Penn places her "quintessential" Christmas tree, based on Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker Suite," in the living room. Ornaments include antiques from her mother and grandmother. The tree is finished with gold gossamer tinsel. "It looks like spun sugar."

