

Handmade Decorations and Gifts Add Sparkle to the Holiday Season

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Economy is high on everyone's list of concerns as preparations for this holiday season get into full swing. But despite the need to economize in all areas, it shouldn't be necessary to forsake all the trimmings and decorations which are traditionally associated with the Christmas season.

With the high price of sugar this year, few homemakers will be willing to bake cookie-type gingerbread men to hang on the tree as decorations and to feed to the birds later as part of their Christmas treat. However, at the Lebanon County Homemakers Christmas program, Extension Home Economist Alletta Shadler offered a substitute recipe which makes attractive substitutes for the real thing - they look the same but are not edible.

Combine 2 cups of baking soda (1 pound), 1 cup cornstarch and 1 1/4 cups water in a saucepan, mixing thoroughly. Stir over medium heat until mixture comes to a low boil and continue stirring until doughlike consistency is reached.

Now turn the dough onto a plate and cover it with a damp cloth or paper towel and store in the refrigerator for about half an hour.

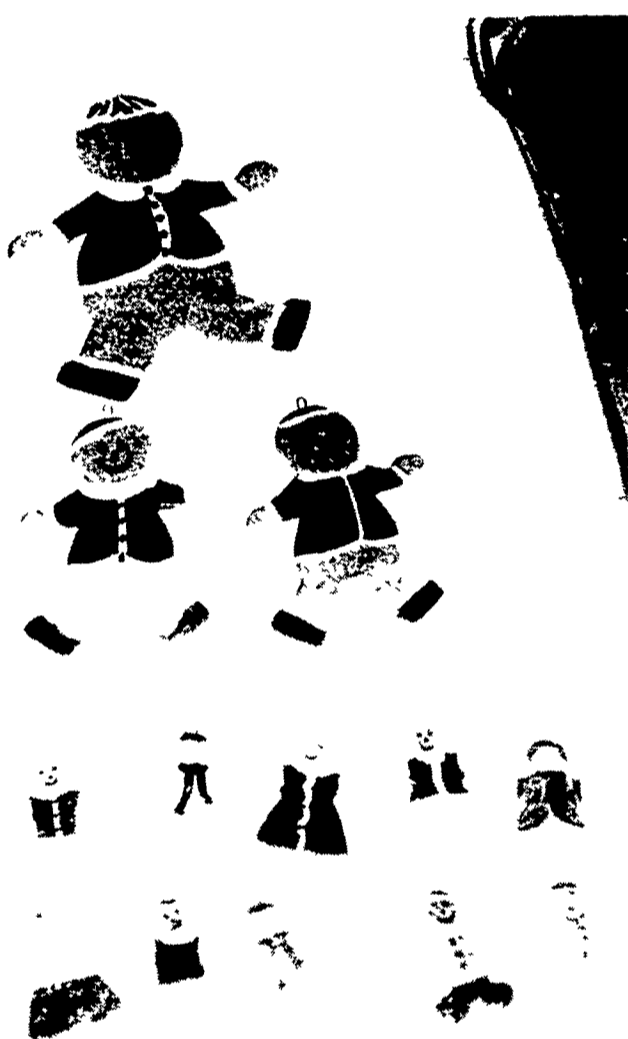
The dough must now be kneaded about five minutes to bring it to the proper consistency for rolling out. After kneading, the dough is ready and should be rolled to about 1/4 inch thickness. It will have a tendency to be sticky, so plenty of flour will need to be used on the working surface.

Now to cut out the decorations. If it's gingerbread figures that are traditional at your home, then simply use your standard cookie cutter. If you'd like to try other figures, just use your imagination. You'll be painting them later, so color is no barrier.

Be sure to work a hole in the cookie for hanging. A paper clip, toothpick, needle or similar sharp object can be used.

The cookie decorations must be dried thoroughly before they are used. The standard directions call for a preheated 350 degree oven which is turned off and the ornaments placed inside until dry, turning them once. Mrs. Shadler suggested that you may want to use a 200 degree oven and dry the figures very slowly. They need to be turned once, and have a tendency to break, so must be handled carefully. The recipe given should make about 20 ornaments, depending upon the size.

When the "cookies" are completely dried and cool, you'll be ready to paint them to make them into authentic gingerbread replicas. Mrs. Shadler says acrylics, tempera or water colors or enamels are all satisfactory. You can use what you have on hand, or experiment with new colors and combinations. Your children will enjoy helping create these pretty tree decorations, and you can be sure



Gingerbread men can be made in all sizes for decorating trees or packages. A cornstarch-baking soda recipe eliminates the need for using the traditional cookie decorations.

they'll have some good ideas about how they should be painted. You may want to shellac the finished product for a glossy look.

After they're painted, insert thin wire or thread and they're ready for your tree.

You may want to make some miniature-sized ornaments out of the dough and use as gift decorations - they'll be attractive and unique and will please young and old alike.

Now that you have attractive gingerbread men for your traditional tree, perhaps you can sort through your fabric scrap bag and find something suitable to make some cloth decorations. Calico and gingham are very "big" in Christmas ideas this year, and they'll contribute some new interest to your tree without a big investment in shiny new balls or other decorations.

Assistant Lebanon County Home Economist Cheryl Reitz suggests that you use your cookie cutters to get the basic design and simply cut two pieces of fabric for every hanging ornament wanted. The two pieces of fabric are then ironed together with fusible interfacing. Thread for hanging the ornament should be added before the pieces are fused together.

For a little extra special touch, glitter can be sprinkled onto dabs of glue or sequins can be sewed or glued on.

If you use fabric scraps on your tree, you might want to cover balls with matching or contrasting fabric or make other small decorations to coordinate the theme throughout the house. Consider adding calico ribbons to your door decoration, your mantel or table centerpiece.

Imagine a tree with old-fashioned gingerbread men, calico trimmings and strands of popcorn and cranberries! With your decorating behind you, you can turn to that

Christmas list where there probably are still a few people with no gift behind their names despite a lot of thought on your part. While it would seem that children should be the easiest to shop for because of the wide array of toys available everywhere, they often are the most difficult because so many children seem to be over-supplied with toys.

But almost no home seems to have enough places to store all those toys, so one good gift idea, which every mother will appreciate, is a drawstring toy bag.

A toy bag can be made very simply, and will be especially easy on the budget if you have some large leftover fabrics which might be suitable. Something sturdy is best - burlap, canvas, denim or the like would be ideal. If the material is washable, so much the better because then the toy bag can easily go to grandmother's or to the babysitter's with the child's favorite toys.

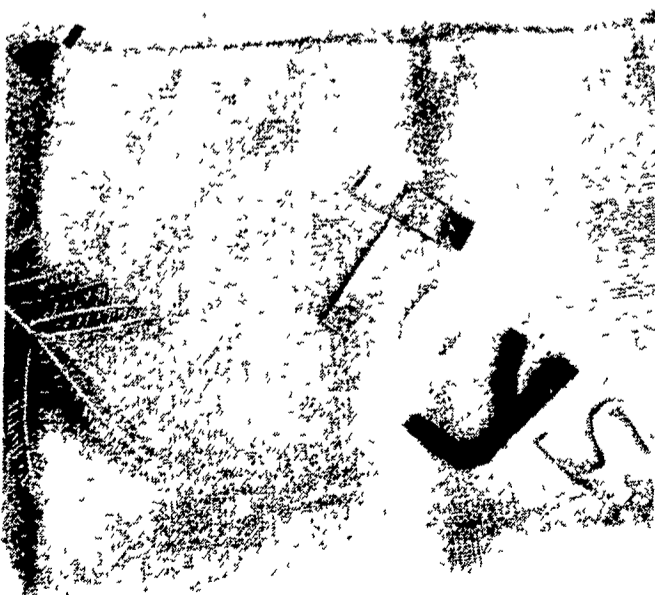
Almost any size bag can be made, scaled to the size of the child, or perhaps to the type of things which will be stored in it. The easiest way to begin is to fold your fabric in half, stitch the side seams and make a casing at the top. Double fold bias tape makes an excellent drawstring, as would a long shoestring or cord. The bag is complete as is, but with a little effort you can personalize it to suit the child.

Felt letters could be used to spell out a child's name, or use the word "Toys" so that the bag's use is obvious immediately. Felt letters or other fabric can be ironed in place with fusible lining. If you are particularly creative you can add storybook characters, and if you're not artistic, just trace them from a child's coloring book. A clown carrying balloons which are lettered will be a delight to any child. The important thing is to dig into your bag of scraps and put leftover fabric and trims to use.

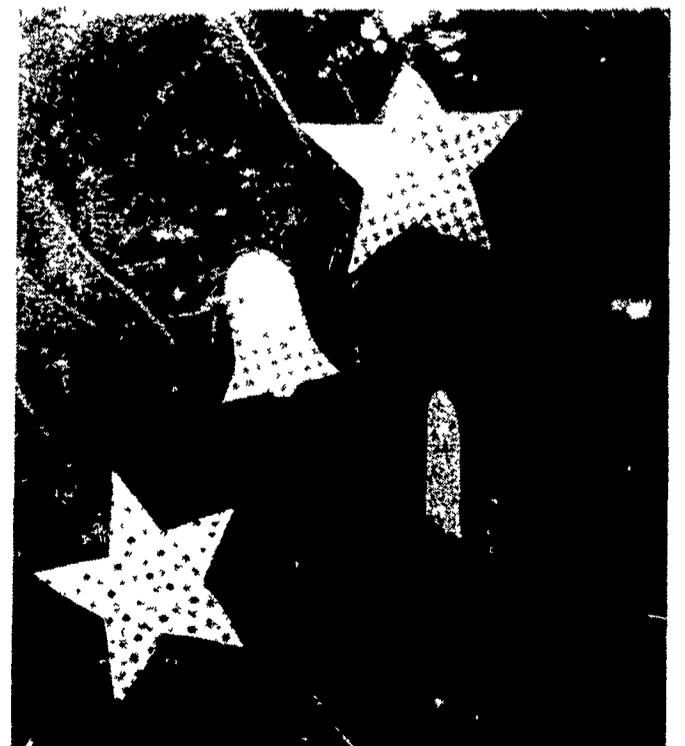
To save on gift wrap, Mrs. Shadler suggested using the toy bag to hold any other gifts you have for the child.

Commercial patterns are available in a wide array of toy and home decorating ideas, so don't despair if you haven't completed your gift list. There's still time to create something which will be appreciated, both as gifts and as interesting decorations for your home.

Most important of all, as you spend the next week finishing your shopping, decorating and baking all those goodies which contribute to your holiday, do take time to remember the true spirit of Christmas, and let that spirit prevail in your home throughout the season and the new year.



A sure delight for any child - and mother - is this drawstring toy bag, designed to make pick-up and storage easier.



Calico and gingham decorations are easy to make and will add a gay splash of color to your traditional tree.