



Story available at <http://billingsgazette.net/articles/2008/12/07/features/yourhome/18-decorate.txt>

Published on Sunday, December 07, 2008.

Last modified on 12/7/2008 at 1:28 am

Homeowner in Gregory Hills has extensive decorating history

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Christmas at Shelley Van Atta's house officially begins Nov. 1. Though she decorates extensively for Halloween, those decorations come down after the last trick-or-treaters have made their rounds. Then more than 80 tubs full of holiday decorations come out of storage.

"I've been working nonstop," Van Atta said of getting her home at 2940 Gregory Drive N. ready for the Billings Symphony Orchestra and Chorale's Holiday Tour of Homes, which took place Saturday. The Van Atta home was one of five local houses lavishly decorated for the holiday, open for public tours to benefit the BSO&C.

Van Atta said it was nice to have a deadline. "Otherwise, I'd be decorating up to Christmas Eve." She retired a year ago from Montana State University Billings, where she was director of university relations. When she was working, Van Atta would be up until 2 a.m. some days, decorating the home.

"The nice thing about being retired is that I can savor the experience," she said. Not only does she enjoy the experience, she enjoys getting to just be "mom."

"I don't do this for anyone but my family," she said. "I want my kids to look back on Christmas as that one special time of year." Van Atta has two sons, ages 24 and 26, who return home during Thanksgiving and Christmas, and a 14-year-old daughter.

Every room of the 7,000-square-foot home is festively adorned. Van Atta's daughter sets up the collectable Department 56 villages found throughout the home. Her sons help hang wreaths, garlands and lights, and her husband, Larry, is in charge of the exterior lights.

"When putting up decorations, there is that feeling of magic," she said, equating it to the fantasy of Disney's Magic Kingdom. "It's a family vacation at home."

Baskets with potpourri, pine cones and sprigs of holly are found in niches throughout the home. Garlands and strands of twinkling lights are wrapped around the banisters.

Greenery is tucked behind the mirrors, and dozens of wreaths hang throughout the home. Even the bathrooms feature festive décor.

Van Atta enjoys the fruits of her labors - especially the 12-foot Christmas tree in her living room adorned with hundreds of ornaments from more than two decades of collecting. The tree takes about a week to set up.

"Every ornament has its place," Van Atta said. A castle from a trip to Disney World dangles at the bottom of the tree. Iridescent glass bulbs allow the sunlight to filter through, creating a colorful rainbow throughout the tree. Several equine-themed ornaments reflect the family's love of horses. She points to a brass ornament, shaped like a trolley, from San Francisco. "My son had just graduated law school when we picked this one up," she said.

An annual process

Van Atta takes photos of her displays each year to assist her in the next year's decorating. "That way, I can go back and recreate it," she said. She also started labeling her wreaths and garlands so she knows their positions in the home. When she packs away the potpourri, she coats it with essential oils before sealing the packaging. Opening the boxes the following year officially kicks off the holiday season with delightful scents.

"Every time I bring something out of a box it brings out a memory. I look forward to seeing them every year," Van Atta said. She glanced at the stockings, hung above the fireplace, and reflected on her children's first Christmases. "These are comforting memories. How can I leave anything in a box?" she said.

Van Atta used to wait till after Thanksgiving to start decorating, but setting up the decorations is a time-consuming project. "It makes no sense to be stressed during a time we are supposed to be celebrating peace and joy," she said. Though Christmas has encroached into other holidays, Van Atta said it's not such a bad thing.

"As a society, we love to have that one special time of year when we celebrate peace on earth, civility and good will, and we have an excuse to be nice to each other. It makes sense that we'd want to stretch out that time," she said. Through the whirlwind of decorating to the family gatherings, Van Atta said she never loses sight of the real reason for Christmas and celebrates the miracle of Jesus' birth with her friends and family.