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*Holiday
Crafts*



Christmas Projects

They're Not Just for the Crafty Anymore

Whether you have skillful hands or are all thumbs, you can turn out spectacular holiday decorations and gifts that make you proud and save money. After touring a sampling of craft stores in North Atlanta, I've come away convinced that crafting isn't just for the crafty anymore.

Experts know the joys of crafting, and after completing your first project you too will be hooked — stare at your completed item, examine it, admire it, conjure up ways to improve it and desire to make more.

Al McGhie, the store manager of Hobby Lobby in Acworth, advised: "Don't worry about what other people think, just enjoy making your craft project. You are the only person who will know if it doesn't turn out exactly the way you wanted."

With stores throughout metro Atlanta, Hobby Lobby features supplies and kits to get started. While I was visiting with McGhie, he pointed out an assortment of plain Christmas stockings that are available for decorating with glitter, paint, beads or photos.

"It's easy, basic stuff," he said, "and we have lots of things that kids can do, too."

Kids? You thought Christmas crafts were just for adults? No way, according to McGhie. Crafts are good for people from age 5 to 105. For the youngest, think in terms of stickers and paper. As children age, add glue, paint and tools.

For kids able to handle glass, McGhie recommended plain glass ornaments that allow the crafter

By Bobbie Christmas



to put several colors of acrylic paint inside, spin it around, and create designs that surprise even the crafter. People with a skilled hand may wish to paint the outsides instead. "You can be the Picasso or Monet of the ornament," he said with a smile. "It all depends on how detailed you want to get."

Wreaths and sprays are popular decorations for children and adults to tackle, McGhie noted, as he showed me ornamental fruit, vegetables, berries and tiny packages wrapped with bows that can be glued, tied or wired onto a base to decorate doors, windows, walls or even mailboxes. "We have everything for centerpieces, too," he added.

McGhie told me his wife, Deb, makes angel ornaments, and he revealed her secret. "She uses wire-based foil garland, the kind with stars, and she shapes it into angels. She uses a gold pipe cleaner for the halo. It's not difficult, and the angels are really cute."

KITS CAN BE HANDY

McGhie recommended a variety of craft kits for needlework, ornaments and other items. "They're great for beginners," he said, "because everything is included, as well as the instructions." Kits range from \$5 to \$50, depending on the type and complexity of the project.

He also advocates projects that children can do year-round. "Kids like the beading kits and wood-burning kits; they are good ways to get your kids interested in crafts and a great way to let a child make a gift for grandma or granddad."

When considering kits for kids, always evaluate the age and ability of the child. Toys "R" Us has a variety of woodworking projects that are made for children, but also might interest people of any age. They certainly captured my imagination.

Dennis Griesbach, the assistant manager at the Alpharetta Toys "R" Us, walked me over to a corner filled with a variety of kits. Although the chain specializes in toys, Griesbach said he especially likes the craft kits because of the benefits to youngsters. "The best thing you can do is keep children active in ways that make them use their imagination," he said. "Building projects and crafts is a good way to make them use their imagination. It moves them in the right direction."

Prices started at around \$8. I saw birdhouses, bird feeders, flowerpot holders, chalk-and-cork message boards, and even commemorative baseball holders. The kits, manufactured under the label of "The Home Depot," are not sold at the home improvement warehouse; they are used only in conjunction with workshops there. Instead, the kits are available all year at Toys "R" Us. They come with all the materials and instructions, and a few of the sets even include tools.

To heck with the kids, I said, and purchased a birdhouse kit for myself for \$10. I don't have the tools or expertise to cut wood, so the pre-cut pieces simplified the project for me.

YET ANOTHER DIRECTION

While many stores cater to people who have an interest in handicrafts, at least one person in metro Atlanta has a business that supplies craft stores. Alice Hyche,



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of Alice's Wonderland of Crochet Fashions in Roswell, invented the "Pom Tree," a gadget that helps crafters make pom-poms, tassels, fringes and bows. It is sold through her Web site and in craft stores all over the country, yet its origins were ordinary.

Hyche had been in business designing crochet projects and selling instructions to publishers and individuals since 1981, but at some point, she admitted she needed help. Her designs often

called for pom-poms and tassels. "I needed to produce them faster than I could by just winding them on my fingers," she recalled, "and one day, I was exercising in a swimming pool and saw a big frame that wound up and stored the lane dividers. I knew if I could design the same thing in miniature, it would be the answer to my pom-pom problem." After a diligent search, she discovered that no one else had a patent on the item, so she patented her invention and went into production with her Pom Tree.

She designs and sells her own crochet patterns, as well. "I have a crochet Christmas stocking pattern, a table runner, and placemats, too, all in beginner crochet patterns." She also has an attractive Christmas-tree skirt pattern and one for her favorite gift for the elderly, lap robes. Many of her patterns, including fashions for babies, published by Leisure Arts in Little Rock, Ark., and the American School of Needlework and Publishing, are available through mail-order catalogues such as Lion Brands Yarn Company and Herrschners, as well as in craft stores.

Interested in working with crafts for the first time? Before you begin, keep these tips in mind:

- Start small. Don't frustrate yourself with a project that requires too much skill.
- Pick age-appropriate and skill level-appropriate crafts, especially if working with children.
- Start with kits. They include all the materials and instructions you need, although you still must supply tools.
- Be prepared. If you don't buy a kit, be sure to have all the items needed, such as paints, nails, screws, a screwdriver, hammer, wire, glue gun or craft glue, for the project. Double-check the project list to make sure you have everything. Set items on or near your work area before beginning.
- Clear adequate space. Cover a bench, floor or table with paper or plastic so that spilled paint or oozing glue will not ruin the day.
- Set aside sufficient time. Some things have to dry overnight before completion. Don't rush a procedure and spoil the end result.
- Enjoy the process. Don't get frustrated if things don't work right the first time. Be willing to take a deep breath and try again. Most mistakes can be hidden or painted over. Michelangelo didn't learn to paint in one day.
- Revel in the end result. Only you will see the blemishes. Don't point them out to others.

START WITH THE OBVIOUS

No search for Christmas crafts would be complete without visiting Michael's Arts and Crafts. I talked with Mary Webster, the assistant manager of the Alpharetta store, which moved into larger quarters in October.

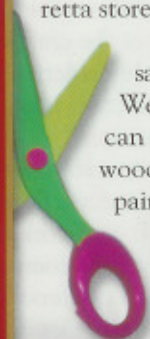
Webster admitted that most craft stores carry the same things, but added, "We have a larger assortment. We even have an ornament-making center, where you can get supplies for making glass, porcelain, plaster or wood ornaments, or even sun catchers which you can paint and hang in the window."

Michael's also has materials for children's projects, Webster noted. "Kids like to give handmade things, and we have everything they need for ornaments, gifts or Christmas cards."

Christmas cards? What a great idea, I admitted. "Yes," she said, "we have colored paper, rubber stamps, stickers, stencils and all the other card-making supplies." One of the interesting supplies I found in the store was a die cutter that allows anyone to cut perfect designs out of almost any paper. The dies come in a large variety of shapes, including clouds, mountains, trees,

flowers, sunbursts and abstract patterns.

For adults, Michael's has swags, garland and wreath bases, and all the items to put on them. "We have demo classes and



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classes for adults and kids in November and December, in addition to our regular classes on painting and cake decorating," Webster said.

As I wandered through Michael's, I also found free project sheets hanging here and there that listed all the necessary materials and gave complete instructions for many projects, including crochet creations, hand-painted gifts, and wreaths.

INVOLVE THE INTERNET

In my search for new craft projects, I found many on the Internet, too, with free downloadable patterns and instructions. One I especially liked came from the Better Homes and Gardens site. Called Silky Sachets, the project uses rice as the base for scented oils that are sewn into hand-painted silk sachets with subtle designs. The actual project calls for gold foil, which I would not use, choosing instead to apply gold acrylic paint. It's cheaper, washable and easier to use. Any pattern or project may be changed to suit your taste, budget or preference.



NO NEED TO STICK TO THE TRIED-AND-TRUE

For the imaginative, break out on your own. Supplies and ideas for holiday gifts and decorations dominate everywhere. My favorite? I visit yard sales year-round and search for objects that can be taken apart and used in crafts. Look for faded lampshades that can be updated with new fabrics, old necklaces that can be taken apart for the beads, even old shoes or purses that can be filled with dirt and plants for unique outdoor flowerpots.

One year I bought hypoallergenic earring posts at a craft store, pulled out all the costume jewelry I'd bought for next to nothing at yard sales, took the beads off the necklaces, and glued the best-looking beads on the posts. For only a few cents a pair, I produced dozens of earrings to give to friends and family members. The smaller beads went to young or petite friends with pierced ears, and the larger went to the women who wore vibrant jewelry. I made a few clip-on sets, too, for the folks without pierced ears.

In other years, I've bought blank T-shirts, which I painted and

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added beads found at yard sales. In an environmental mode, one year I bought canvas bags and painted them, encouraging friends to use them regularly at the supermarket instead of using resource-depleting paper or plastic. I still get compliments on the two canvas bags I kept for myself, almost every time I shop.

My favorite quick and easy gift idea is a squirrel feeder for friends who like to watch the antics of our furry friends. For this gift, I can shop at any hardware store, but for purposes of pricing the project, I visited Daniel Ace Hardware on the border of Roswell and Woodstock.

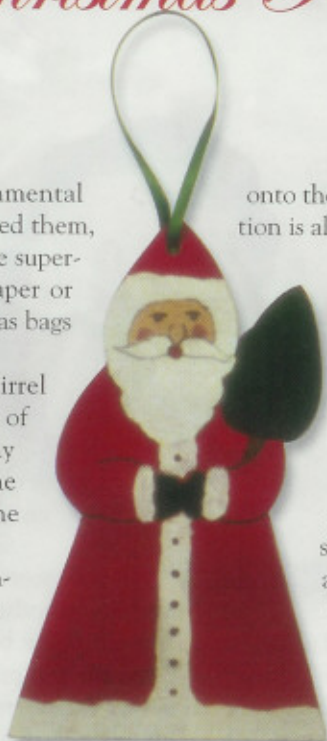
For each feeder, buy the following: One 1/4-inch-by-3-inch lag eye bolt, one foot of chain and a connector, such as a small Acco Quick Link. For each feeder, you'll also need one ear of dried corn; Ace Hardware sells bags of dried corn in the pet department.

To assemble the feeder, thread the chain through the circular eye of the bolt and connect it with the Quick Link, which is weatherproof. Screw an ear of corn

onto the threads of the bolt, to show receivers what the contraption is all about, and you're done. All you have to do after that is box up the finished product, and you have a handmade gift that took minutes to make and cost \$3 or less. The chain fits over a tree limb, or the recipient can open the connector, swing the chain over a deck railing, and reconnect it. I once saw a similar feeder priced at more than \$12, and I laughed all the way home.

Whether you want to laugh at high prices, play, get your child involved in an esteem-building activity or show your love with a handmade gift, look around you at all the options available. Many stores and schools offer classes, too, but even without the courses, most projects take little more than time, imagination, patience and the desire to create something that stands apart from the everyday gift or decoration. As Webster said, "Handmade gifts are the best, because you personalized the gift by making it yourself." ■

Source information available in the Resource Guide on page 87.



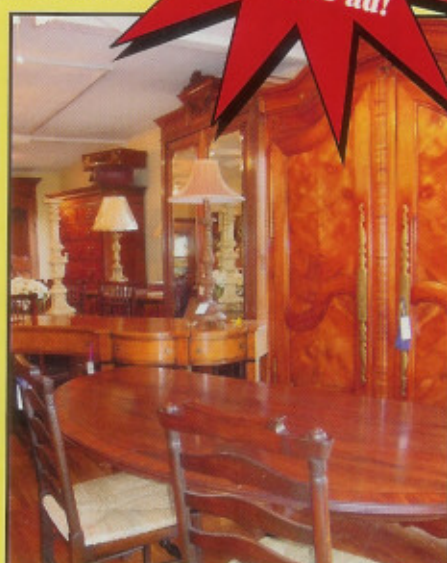
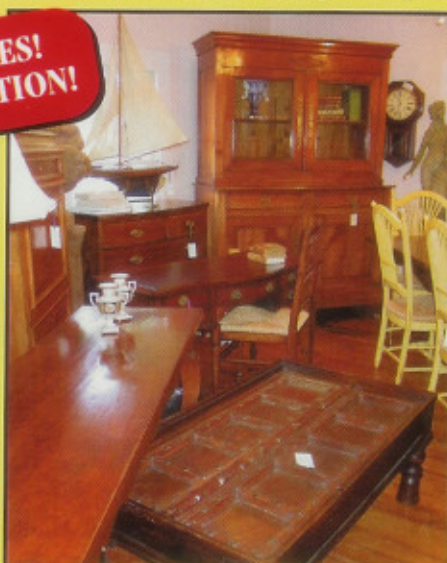
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