

The Holiday Gaffes That Keep Giving



PJ Loughran

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PROBABLY NOT THE QUESTION THEY'LL BE ASKING ANYWAY

It would be nice to report that the error in judgment made by the interior designer Darren [Henault](#) and his partner, Michael Bassett, came about because they were so besotted with their twin daughters that they temporarily lost reason.

In fact, what prompted it was the purchase of their dream house in Dutchess County, N.Y., which included a 30-acre Christmas tree farm. Determined to have an “authentic” Christmas tree, the couple hiked out in two feet of snow to cut down the tree themselves.

“We’ve got a hacksaw, because I was terrified of chain saws,” Mr. [Henault](#) says. “I told Michael, ‘You’re not hacking off a limb two nights before Christmas.’ This tree is six inches in diameter. That doesn’t sound that big — we’re two strapping guys, we go to the gym, we’re not wusses, we have trainers. It takes an hour and a half.

“Then, when the tree falls, it scrapes Michael’s entire face. Then we have to drag this thing several hundred yards through the snow into the house, cutting off extra limbs to get it through the door. We’re having a party in two days, and the yard is a complete mess.

“We’re pulling it through the door when we realize that when you buy a tree, it’s all bound up. We’re screaming at each other, Michael is flipping out about the paint job, we’re scraping the hell out of the beautifully finished pine floor we’ve just installed.”

In the living room, the couple realize their tree is much too tall and too large. Mr. **Henault** hacks off more limbs.

“I had just perfectly decorated this room,” he says. “The walls are upholstered in gorgeous green linen, the carpets were all handmade in Guatemala — gorgeous linens and cotton in big chunky fibers.”

And the needles that fell off the tree?

“They’re all really stuck in these big chunky fibers.”

The following year, Mr. **Henault** and Mr. Bassett become parents. Determined that the girls should have an authentic Christmas experience, Mr. **Henault** and Mr. Bassett again cut down their own tree and again make the same mistakes. The next year, they do it all over again.

By the fourth year, they have wised up: they give their handyman \$50 and he goes out with his chain saw, cuts down a tree of the correct height, and puts it in the stand with no damage to the house, in about an hour.

Why did it take them so long to do that?

“Good question,” Mr. **Henault** says. “The first time you do it out of ignorance, the second time out of determination to get it right — and you have children and there’s a charm to it. You are new parents and you think, ‘I am going to fix everything about my childhood I didn’t like in one gesture and create a perfect childhood for my children.’”

“By the fourth year, you realize you are not going to fix your childhood — which was not bad, by the way — and your kids are not going to remember this, it’s irrelevant. And if the biggest issue that your kids are going to have in their life is that you didn’t cut down their Christmas tree, you have done an amazing job. Not to mention that their father and I wouldn’t still be together, because we couldn’t face another year dragging that tree.”