

JANUARY

Scented Linen Water

I don't know what makes clean sheets so comforting, but the first night spent sleeping on them feels like an absolute luxury. You can reproduce that feeling all the time by spritzing linen water on your sheets after turning down the bed. Spray from a few feet above the bed and allow the sheets to dry for a minute or two before you climb in. The spray also works well when ironing clothes or even just to refresh a room.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

4 ounces distilled water

25-30 drops of essential oils of your choice (my favorites are pre-blended "unwind" or "sleep inducing" mixes)

A small, clean bottle with a spray nozzle

DIRECTIONS

Blend all ingredients together, then test the spray on a blanket or towel, or just mist into the air and walk into it as it falls. You may like to add more essential oil if you prefer a stronger scent.

Be sure not to add coloring; I did that once and stained my sheets!

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FEBRUARY

Boyfriend-Bait Beef Stroganoff

While this dish can be used to bait a boyfriend, it's an equally excellent recipe to prepare for friends and family on special occasions, to lure home a college kid, or to whip up for yourself when you're hankering something meaty and creamy.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

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| 1 1/2 pounds beef tenderloin, trimmed and cut into bite-sized pieces | 3 cups mushrooms, sliced 2 cups cold beef broth or stock 3 teaspoons cornstarch |
| 4 tablespoons butter, divided | 1 cup sour cream |
| 1 cup shallots, finely chopped | 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard |

DIRECTIONS

Over medium-high heat, melt 2 tablespoons of butter and add beef tenderloin. Cook, turning occasionally, for about 2 minutes until seared on all sides. You will still be able to see some red. Set aside.

Add remaining butter to a new pan and melt over medium-high heat. Add the shallots and mushrooms and cook until slightly browned, soft, and wilted, about 5 minutes.

Whisk together the cornstarch and beef broth. Pour mixture into the pan with the shallots and mushrooms and stir. Let the mixture simmer until thickened, about 2–3 minutes.

Add the sour cream, mustard, beef, and juices to the pan. Stir and reduce heat to medium. Cook until just warmed for rare beef, or continue cooking a few additional minutes to desired doneness. Add salt and pepper to taste. Serve over rice, riced cauliflower, mashed potatoes, or egg noodles.

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MARCH

Cordon Rose Cheesecake

Although we've never met, Rosy Levy Beranbaum taught me to bake through her classic cookbook, *The Cake Bible*. Cordon Rose Cheesecake is both creamy and firm, and in more than twenty-five years I have never found one that offered competition in either flavor or presentation.

Substitute any fruit you wish for the strawberries if you prefer. We love to use blueberries to mix it up. You can make this with a simple graham-cracker crust if you can't find ladyfingers. I almost prefer it that way.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- 1 package ladyfingers
- 2 (8-ounce) packages cream cheese, softened
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch, optional
- 3 large eggs
- 3 tablespoons lemon juice, freshly squeezed
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 3 cups sour cream
- 4 to 5 cups strawberries, hulled
- 1/4 cup currant jelly
- 1 tablespoon water
- A 9-inch by 2½-inch (or higher) round springform pan
- A 12-inch cake pan or roasting pan to serve as water bath

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease the round springform pan and wrap the outside of it with a double layer of heavy-duty aluminum foil.

Slice each ladyfinger in half lengthwise. Line the sides of the pan with the ladyfingers, rounded sides against the side of the pan, so that you have a ring of ladyfingers resembling a picket fence. Line the bottom of the pan with more ladyfingers, rounded sides down. Set aside.

In a large mixing bowl, use a whisk beater (or a wire whisk or an electric mixer) to beat the cream cheese and sugar until very smooth, about 3 minutes). Beat in the cornstarch. Add the eggs one at a time, beating after each addition until smooth and scraping down the sides. Add the lemon juice and salt and beat until incorporated. Beat in the sour cream until just blended.

Pour the batter into the greased springform pan. Place the springform pan in the larger pan. Pour very hot water into the larger pan, about 1 inch high, so that the springform pan is surrounded by the water. Bake for 25 minutes, then cover the pan loosely with foil. Bake for an additional 15 minutes, then turn off the oven without opening the door and let the cake cool in oven for 1 hour. Remove the springform pan to a rack and cool to room temperature, about 1 hour.

Cover with greased plastic wrap and refrigerate overnight. To unmold, run a towel under hot water and wipe the sides of the pan several times. Run a thin metal spatula around the sides of the cake and release the sides of the springform pan. Place a plastic-wrapped plate on top and invert. Remove the bottom of the pan. Reinvert onto a serving plate.

Arrange strawberries or other fruit on top of the cake. If you have recently rinsed them, make sure they are thoroughly dry. In a small saucepan or microwave oven, heat the currant jelly until melted and bubbling. Strain it into a small cup and stir in the water. Brush it over the berries.

Refrigerate cake until shortly before serving.

Recipe used with the kind permission of Rose Levy Beranbaum.

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APRIL

Puddle Jumpers

April showers bring May flowers, but we can have April flowers too. I love to plant April flowers in containers that remind me that it's . . . April!

You can make fun planters out of repurposed wellies or rubber boots. Use boots that your family has outgrown, or visit the thrift shop and buy an inexpensive pair. Poke holes into the bottom of each boot so that they will properly drain. Fill with soil about three quarters of the way up the boot, then plant early bloomers such as pansies or snapdragons.

It's fun to do this in autumn, too, planting spring bulbs with sturdy stems such as crocuses or daffodils. Place in a protected area during the winter and then bring to the front steps or front entry in early spring.

It's fun to pop a small umbrella alongside of this display if you have one handy.

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MAY

May Day Basket

May Day—May 1—is a good excuse to celebrate. Where we live, it's also a good time to come out of winter hibernation, get outside, and reconnect with neighbors. One May Day tradition is delivering little baskets of flowers to neighbors.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

A small, woven basket (You can get leftovers from Easter on the cheap, or you can use empty strawberry containers.)

Pansies or other small plants (The plants should fit snugly in the basket, but leave enough room to water them.)

DIRECTIONS

Place plants in the basket. If the basket has a handle, hang it on a neighbor's door. Traditionally, givers ring the doorbell and run—but it might be more neighborly to say hello and give the basket in person!

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JUNE

Gorgeous Garden Pots

I love to use flower pots in my garden. They can bring a spot of color into an area that doesn't have enough room for a flower bed, and they create a lovely collection in a sparsely planted area. They're easy to tend, cheap to plant, can be changed with the seasons, and give a lovely, rustic feel to any corner.

My pots always looked a little one dimensional till a friend shared a trick for deciding what to plant. She suggested choosing a thriller, a filler, and a spiller.

Choose the thriller first. This will be the tallest plant in the pot. It goes in the middle of the planter and will be the first thing to catch the eye. Around it, you'll alternate the fillers—plants that will grow to about half the height of the thriller and generally bloom continuously and profusely—and the spillers—plants that will tumble over the side of the planter.

Fill your pot halfway with fresh soil before starting. You'll want to use soil that already contains added plant food. Plants in pots need more food and regular watering than plants in the ground. Add the thriller plant, and pack it in a little. Add the spillers and fillers, alternating them. The plants should not be crowded—they'll grow, remember. If the plants are root-bound when you buy them, break up the roots a little when you pull them out of the container.

Once your plants are settled in, water them till the water runs out of the bottom of the pot.

Don't forget to buy either all sun-loving plants or all shade-tolerant plants. As long as all the plants have the same sun and water requirements, they'll become good neighbors and friends.

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JULY

Paint-Sample Sheets

Summer is an ideal time to paint inside your house or apartment. It's easy to have the windows open (this lets out fumes, and the fresh air helps to dry the paint), and the bright sunlight allows you to see exactly what your chosen color will look like in brightest light.

I've always found it difficult to figure out if a color was going to work in a big room with just those tiny squares they give you at the paint counter. But I didn't really want to paint big swatches on my wall either. Here's what I do instead: I purchase a sample-sized can of the paint I'm considering. I then apply the paint color to laminating sheets (the kind used to laminate documents) and use poster putty to attach the sheets to the walls.

Laminating sheets, which you can buy at an office-supply store or online, have a rough side and a smooth side; you'll want to paint on the rough side. Coat the sheet once, and let it dry. It will look crackly, but that's okay. Paint a second coat.

When it's dry, you can hang it on the wall and get a good idea of what the color will look like in your room. The painted sheet will bend around corners, and you can do three or four of them and hang them at the same time to see what the paint will look like in different areas and in different light!

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AUGUST

Porcelain and Pumice

I've long known that pumice stones were good for removing tough skin from the heel of my foot, but a friend who has worked as a housekeeper shared another trick with me: a pumice stone will remove the dark spots and circles that sometimes appear around the drains in porcelain sinks, tubs, and toilets.

Wet the sink or tub, then wet the pumice stone. Very gently, but persistently, rub against the stain. A little pressure is enough to remove the ring but not scratch or damage the porcelain. Rinse with water.

This will also remove hard-water rings in your toilets but, well, you'll probably want to use a stone you've dedicated for toilet use only!

I haven't yet tried this on porcelain cookware, but it might be worth investigating.

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SEPTEMBER

Cupcakes in a Jar

These are fun to send to a kid at college, a service member, or friends and family who live far away. Any kind of cake mix works, but it's fun to use food coloring to make team-color cupcakes, or tie-dyed cupcakes, or any favorite color of the recipient. Red velvet cake with cream cheese frosting looks especially lovely. Tell your recipients to eat these with a spoon!

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

1 cake mix, any kind

8 to 12 half-pint canning jars with lids

1 recipe of butter cream or cream cheese frosting

Something to pipe the frosting onto the cupcakes with—either a pastry bag or a plastic sandwich bag with one corner cut off

DIRECTIONS

Preheat the oven to 325 degrees. (Because you're baking in glass, 325 degrees works better than a higher temperature.) Make the cake mix as directed, then fill each jar about halfway with cake batter. Place jars on a cookie sheet and bake for about 30 minutes, till an inserted toothpick comes out clean.

Let cool completely, then pipe frosting onto the cakes. (If shipping overseas, don't add icing.) Add sprinkles if desired. Screw the lids onto the jars and freeze the cupcakes completely. (If the cupcakes are a little too tall, just give them a little trim before you ice them; the frosting will hide your edit!) Wrap in bubble wrap, then place into a sturdy shipping box. Mail away and await the coming applause!

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OCTOBER

Lots-to-Love Lasagna

As autumn winds and rain reintroduce themselves and the nights get cozy and cool, I'm ready to set salads aside and indulge in comfort food. This recipe is for the ultimate lasagna. Don't stint on the ingredients; use the best you can find. The recipe makes two large batches; they freeze beautifully for a busy night or as a delivery to a sick friend. Smaller pans, say four 8 x 8 pans, work too. Just watch your baking time, taking it out after perhaps 30 minutes instead of 45. This is an all-day project, though for most of the time the sauce simmering or cooling, so it can be going in the background, perfuming your house, while you're doing something else.

Lasagna is very forgiving. Like olives? Add some. Like mushrooms? Stir fry them with the onions. More cheese, less cheese? It's your call.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- 3 cups chopped onion
- 3 tablespoons minced garlic
- 8 ounces finely chopped pancetta, or American bacon if you can't find pancetta
- 3 pounds ground Italian sausage
- 5 cans (28 ounces each) of whole, peeled tomatoes
- 12 ounces tomato paste
- 2 tablespoons Italian seasoning with sea salt
- Fresh lasagna noodle sheets (You can find these in the deli section. If you can't find them, use regular noodles, parboiled and patted dry.)
- 1 pound sliced provolone cheese
- 4 fresh mozzarella cheese balls (6 ounces each), thinly sliced
- 2 cups grated parmesan cheese
- Fresh basil leaves, if desired

2 9x13 pans (I use disposable—that way I can give the lasagna away or freeze it for my own use. I can pop the frozen lasagna out of the disposable dish and put it in a nice dish if necessary.)

DIRECTIONS

Heat large frying pan over medium-high heat. Add the onions, garlic, and pancetta (or bacon) to the pan. Cook, stirring constantly, till meat is crisp and onions are brown, about 10-12 minutes. Remove from heat.

Heat a very large pot over medium-high heat. Add the sausage and cook till brown and cooked through. Break the sausage up with a wooden spoon as you go, but try to keep it in dime-sized chunks. Drain.

Add the onion mixture to the sausage pot. Then stir in tomatoes, tomato paste, and seasoning. Bring to a simmer, then turn heat to low and let cook for 2 hours, stirring occasionally and breaking up the tomatoes as you do. Continue to season to taste. Let cool completely. The sauce will thicken as it cools.

Ladle sauce onto the bottom of each pan till it's about 1 inch deep. Add a layer of fresh lasagna noodles. Layer sliced provolone on top, slightly overlapping the pieces. Layer mozzarella on top, the rounds barely touching. Sprinkle with parmesan. Add another layer of noodles, all three cheeses again, and then ladle sauce over all of it. Add any other cheese slices that are left over, and sprinkle with a light layer of parmesan and sea salt. If you're feeling fancy, slice some fresh basil leaves and scatter on top.

The lasagna you're saving should be frozen unbaked. Thaw before baking.

The one you're eating should be baked at 350 degrees for about 45 minutes. Let it sit for 15 minutes after you take it out of the oven. This helps it keep its shape when cut and not be runny. Enjoy!

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NOVEMBER

Twinkly Topiaries

Sometimes when the weather outside is cold, it's nice to have living greenery in the house. A topiary project is especially rewarding at this time of year because you can spread some battery-operated twinkle lights among the leaves.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

Planter or flower pot (Terracotta pots are nice to use because they look good with French-inspired topiary, and they are relatively inexpensive.)

A topiary frame (found at craft stores or online)

Planting soil

A plant with 6 to 8 vines, about 6 inches long (Ivy works well because it doesn't require a lot of light; some herbs work well on smaller frames.)

Twinkle lights

DIRECTIONS

Fill your planter about halfway with soil. Place your plant into the pot, making sure to break up the roots a little at the base. Settle it in tightly, then pack soil around it till the pot is full.

Next, stick the topiary frame into the pot. Gently wind the vines through the frame.

Water your plant completely. As the vines grow out, continue to wind them through the frame. You can snip and trim with scissors, and as suckers start to grow from the base of the plant, wind those around the frame too!

Once your plant is grown enough, add some twinkle lights. Just remember to take out the battery before you water!

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DECEMBER

Heavenly Scented Sea Salts

Dead Sea salts are said to have healing and restorative properties, and I'm a believer because I've experienced it. These salts will help you relax and unwind during a typically overextended month. Even better, you can share them with friends for welcome and inexpensive Christmas treats. If you don't have time for a bath, just open the jar, inhale for a few seconds, and be calmed or energized depending on which oils you've chosen!

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

Glass jars with lids (Blue or green canning jars work really well for this and are festive.)

Large bag of Dead Sea salts (You can find these online.)

Essential oils of your choice (Lavender or citrusy scents work well for this.)

DIRECTIONS

Place 1½ cups of sea salt and 25 drops of oil into each jar. Place lid tightly on jar, and shake to mix. For each bath, place ¼ to ½ cup of salt in the tub while water is running. Swirl water before climbing in.

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