

**THE FIX**

# A beginner's guide to decorating your home

**By Michelle Higgins**

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*This article is part of a series aimed at helping you navigate life's opportunities and challenges. What else should we write about? Contact us: [smarterliving@nytimes.com](mailto:smarterliving@nytimes.com).*

You've finally decided it's time to get a real sofa and stop eating off paper plates. Maybe you're just starting out, with a new job and a new apartment — or maybe you're not. Either way, like many people, you may be on a tight budget, with little left over for decorating.

To help you get started, several design professionals offered tips on how to make your place look like a grown-up lives there without spending a fortune.

**INVEST IN THE ESSENTIALS** “I always tell people who are decorating their first apartments that it is important to spend money on the bigger-ticket items, like sofas, beds and dining tables,” said the interior designer Sheila Bridges. “You can always accessorize with inexpensive things like toss pillows, bedding and lighting to pull everything together.” Investment pieces — like that little black dress or the perfect-fitting blazer in your wardrobe — will act as a foundation you can build on.

**MAKE SURE YOU CAN TAKE IT WITH YOU** If this is your first place, “it is likely that you will move in the next few years,” Ms. Bridges said. A well-made sofa or bed can go with you, but you're not going to take the wallpaper. Likewise, it doesn't make sense to splurge on custom curtains that won't fit the windows in your next home.

Art, on the other hand, “will make a huge impact on your space and can be brought with you from apartment to apartment,” said Megan Opel, an interior designer at Laurel & Wolf, an online design service. “I advise splurging on original paintings from your favorite artists, because nothing will make a space feel more like *you* than personally curated art.”

But it doesn't have to cost a lot. “Custom framing can take any hand-me-down or thrift-store find from trash to treasure,” said Kimberly Winthrop, a senior designer at Laurel & Wolf, who recommends Framebridge.com for “affordable and quick custom framing.”

(Related: How to find the perfect throw pillow)

**UPGRADE YOUR LIGHTING** It might not occur to most people to swap out existing light fixtures. But as Ms. Winthrop pointed out: “Changing the lighting is much easier than you think and can make a big impact. It is also very easy to swap back out when the time comes for you to move out.”

**PASS ON PRICEY ACCESSORIES** Don't blow your budget on throw pillows, blankets or towels — or anything else that you know you'll have to replace on a regular basis. Apart from the wear-and-tear aspect, Ms. Winthrop said, “our taste in home décor can sometimes change as often as our taste or trends in fashion.” And changing small things like these is an easy way to refresh to your space.



Trevor Tondro

**GO VINTAGE** Sites like Chairish, Craigslist and eBay are a great source of reasonably priced antique and vintage coffee tables, dining tables and chairs, said Ms. Opel of Laurel & Wolf, who found an expandable Henredon table and six cane chairs on Craigslist for \$500. The search might take a little more time and effort — Ms. Opel looked for months — but “the payoff is big when you find quality items at a steal,” she said.

And as Maxwell Ryan, the founder of Apartment Therapy, noted, it's not just about saving money: Vintage pieces add character to your space. Mr. Ryan said he recently visited the home of a friend that was decorated — and not cheaply — with all new furnishings, and “the whole house felt so impersonal and so lifeless, even though it was pretty.” If you want a home that's warm, cozy and inviting, he said, a good rule of thumb is to “always have at least 25 percent used, vintage or hand-me-down furniture.”



Jane Beiles for The New York Times

**DON'T FORGET THE KITCHEN** You can do a lot with everyday objects to jazz up the kitchen, said Mr. Ryan, who likes to pick up beautifully packaged foods like cookies from Lazzaroni Amaretti that come in bright, distinctive tins he can leave on display. A couple of strategically placed bottles of wine, a basket of fruit or a good cutting board, he said, will add color and warmth to any counter as well. “I also like to save corks and put them in a bowl.”

When it comes to glasses and dinnerware, Mr. Ryan advised keeping it simple. "I'm a big fan of stemless wine glasses," he said, because they can be used for all kinds of drinks, so you don't have to waste space or money on different types of glasses. His suggestion for a good splurge? Buy three quality knives and a few really good pots and pans that you can keep forever. If that's not an option, you can pick up most kitchen basics at a restaurant supply store like those found on the Bowery for a couple hundred dollars.

**ABOVE ALL, RESTRAIN YOURSELF** "In the excitement of moving into their first apartment, people are all too often in a rush to do everything all at once and fill the space immediately with one exhilarating shopping trip," said Terence Conran, the British design guru, retailer and restaurateur. "I have always thought it much better to live with your home first and understand the space before gradually furnishing it and adding color."

He continued: "Obviously you need the basics in place to live there, but by buying one or two pieces at a time, I think you have a better chance of creating a first apartment that works well and reflects your personality, which can only make you happier."

Investing in one thing at a time will also allow you to save up for higher-quality pieces. Start with essential furnishings for where you will sleep, eat and sit; side tables, credenzas and curtains can all come later.

Of course, if you are too strapped to invest in anything major at the moment, there is another option: "Buy cheap, modest furniture (Ikea is excellent) that fits the space you are living in and your style of life," Mr. Conran suggested. "As you move up the property ladder and get a bit more money in your pocket, then you can think about furniture that will last a lifetime."

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