

Home for the Holidays

A glimpse into Sam Allen's Connecticut home, designed for seasonal gatherings

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NEIL LANDINO

Sam Allen says there's no excuse not to decorate. Yes, we're home a lot. Yes, our celebrations may be limited in size. Yes, we may not be throwing party after party. That said, do it for yourself. Because it feels good. Because it's beautiful. Because every day and every celebration matters and has meaning—and deserves a red bow. We caught up with the busy designer—founder of Sam Allen Interiors (*samallinteriors.com*), a Westport-based boutique residential and commercial design firm—in between running to current projects and launching a new shop. In our conversation, he explains how to create a welcoming home by opening his own, which, of course, he festively and tastefully decorated. He shares how he did it and how already loved furniture, fabrics and accessories around the house add a personal touch to a look. Because of the news, Covid and stress, he says the importance of a beautiful, comforting home is especially important—we all need a bit of magic. Here, Sam serves as our expert guide to holiday designing and uses images of his own home and a step-by-step tutorial to help the rest of us create a bit of cheer at home.



What elements work for the holidays?

"I am drawn to a few major elements year after year that never seem to tire. Glass-glittered and old-school-mercury, with hints of gold and blush, ball ornaments in varied sizes. For example, I love putting them in hand-etched mercury urns, which have been in my family forever, on the kitchen table for symmetry. And, of course, any size faux feather wreaths in white or gray. Depending on the scale, I love to hang them with pale-gray silk ribbon inside in front

of windows and add larger ones—do a pair over the front of French doors or a large-scale mirror. The reflection is stunning! Also, I am very happy to incorporate pieces for all four seasons—whether it's shiny mint julep cups for small floral arrangements, vintage hotel silver ice buckets for larger arrangements and mercury votive holders for candles down the dining table. Really, any hotel silver makes everything around you just shine and more elevated. There are so many good sources for not expensive hotel silver—silver-



top: Sam Allen at home
center: Silver wreath from Millie Rae's on gray silk ribbon
right: Vintage Wedgwood gilded china with coordinating stemware and vintage Tiffany & Co. silver cutlery. Each setting has glittered pinecones tied with velvet ribbon (Millie Rae's). Mercury vases are topped with faux feather wreaths and hammered silver spheres and the table is lined with vases filled with red roses and sit in silver wreaths (Millie Rae's). Terrain trees and votives add ambience.

plated looks so similar. Hotel Silver LTD is my go-to source and has so many options and all different kinds of pieces."

Anything to avoid?

"I am not a real lover of red poinsettias or red carnations. They're too common and expected around the holidays. But I do love small or large arrangements that you can easily create yourself of red roses or pink, white and striped amaryllis. The three colors together look like a giant fantastic candy cane."

How do you transition a look from Thanksgiving to the winter holidays?

"Easily! There are so many kinds of branches that work with both holidays, especially with a keen eye and, tweaked carefully, you can re-use—magnolia, quince, holly, pussy willows and, of course, fresh flowers done in solid arrangements, so you don't have to worry about making it complicated. I adore green-and-white parrot tulips, which can be used on your Thanksgiving or Christmas table.

They bring in some green for the holidays, but the pattern on the flower is timeless."

What if we're not planning big gatherings?

"There is always a way to make entertaining special! It does not need to be in a formal setting. Anywhere that you take the time to create something a little different and unique instantly makes it cozy and festive. Even just the island in your kitchen or breakfast nook—it works fine when you are having an intimate gathering. It actually makes it more special as everyone is closer together to celebrate."

Any favorite local stores?

"Absolutely! We are very blessed to live in an area with so many good home-furnishing boutiques, and I am all about shopping local. Terrain is by far my favorite and has the biggest assortment from ornaments, holiday decor, fresh magnolia, or boxwood wreaths and garlands—it's truly one-stop shopping and the way the merchandise is displayed is just inspiring in and of itself. A few



above: The designer arranged mixed ginger jars, orchids in a bowl and glass trees from Millie Rae's. He placed green glass pinecone ornaments and large Hotel Silver Bowl, filled with large round mercury ornaments, on a rattan round table from Terrain.

HOW TO CREATE A PRO-LEVEL LOOK, STEP-BY-STEP

To keep holiday decorating from seeming overwhelming, Sam Allen suggests incorporating pieces from around the house. "Not only is it a money saver, but it also gives your home a richer, more layered look," he says. Blue-and-white ginger jars—vintage, reproduction and all motifs and sizes—are his choice now. Here are the next steps...

1 "I gather as many pairs of ginger jars that I own, all sizes, as scale is very important, and stagger them on the vintage French sideboard in the living room."

2 "I put the tallest pair in the far corners to anchor the sideboard and fill them with tons of red Hypericum berry branches, as I want to incorporate red—anything in that color instantly makes it feel festive."

3 "Then, I stagger the different pairs and place three sizes of glass-glittered trees between them to give each vignette depth and to add interest."

4 "Next, I fill the pair of ginger jars at the front and center with green-and-white parrot tulips, my favorite holiday flower."

5 "To finish it off, I fill a blue-and-white Chinese-motif bowl with white orchids and layer in preserved sheet moss for drama and elegance. Incorporate something you would always have in the area, regardless of the holiday, so it doesn't seem contrived and like a holiday window in a department store. It looks effortless, which is how you want any design to feel."



top: Sam Allen ties vintage red-and-white stripe ribbon on a Terrain wreath of real Magnolia leaves—they are preserved, so they don't dry out and can last for years.

home

of my other favorites that have amazing products for the holidays are Millie Rae's, Bel Mondo Home and The Beehive in Fairfield. All different price points, so there is truly something for everyone."

Who inspired this look?

"Tory Burch. Nobody decorates for the holidays like she does. The way she decorates all of her homes so effortlessly and how her brand does all of their holiday windows are just so inspiring. We also have a very similar philosophy on how to decorate for the holidays—I love setting the tables in unusual ways, and working on the flowers is truly therapeutic to me. I encourage clients and friends to try things that seem imperfect; it will always have a divine and unexpected outcome."

Who inspires you, generally?

"Martha Stewart by far—a dear friend and icon. She has taught me so much over the years, from how to run a business and brand and truly all things home, gardening, cooking and especially entertaining! Also, Daniel Romualdez, Aerin Lauder and my favorite event planner, David Monn."

What are you thankful for?

"I am incredibly grateful that I get to wake up every day doing something I love and am so passionate about. It is so satisfying to help people design their dream home or turn their houses into homes that reflect them and their families. I am blessed to have amazing clients who trust me and my vision and have since I was eighteen, when I first opened my business. I can't believe it's been eleven years—boy, time flies! I was nineteen when the cover of the *New York Times* Home Section read: 'Get on board for the Sam Allen ride—when you hire Sam Allen, you're buying an experience.' That couldn't be more true, even now. I do not just decorate my clients' homes; I believe in elevating their entire lifestyle."

Anything else?

"Yes! I could not be more thrilled to share that I am launching my very own online shop entitled The Shop by Sam Allen, where you can purchase products I've



top: Pier 1 glass and faux fur trees and a white faux fur wreath decorate a vintage French armoire. Magnolia branches and magnolia blossoms by Diane James Home fill hurricanes on the mantle with magnolia garland from Terrain. The faux feather tree under cloche is from Bel Mondo Home. **bottom:** An antique breadmaker table is topped with ceramic crackle urns and oversized mercury balls with hand-etched detail. Fresh roses fill a creamware container flanked with pinecone topiaries by Diane James Home.

collected, curated and designed that will get your home, garden and kitchen tasks efficiently, beautifully and purposefully done. I want to inspire people to make their homes beautiful, functional and more meaningful by offering

high-quality products of value, super function, innovation and, of course, beautiful design. It's just the beginning. The shelves at The Shop by Sam Allen are being stocked daily with my exclusive products and collections."

3 Musts for Sam Allen's Perfect Holiday Season

No. 1

ORGANIZATION

“I watch my team place all of the lights very strategically as I direct them where every single item goes. I am a bit of a control freak—maybe somewhat perfectionist—especially at the holidays.”

No. 2

INSPIRATION

“I have loved holiday decorations since I first could walk. My favorite part is pulling out the storage bins from the attic, all organized by category. I love unpacking them and sorting everything with my team while holiday music plays in the background. Let's just say it's a bit of a production. Every year, I place all the items in different areas around the house and design depending on my mood or if something has strongly inspired me. I never duplicate.”

No. 3

SCENT

“Every year as a family we cut down a balsam fir, which is the most fragrant of the Christmas tree varieties, but their limbs are not the most sturdy. If you have heavy ornaments, stick with a fraser fir; while less fragrant, its branches hold up. And local boutiques sell divine holiday candles that smell like fresh Christmas trees. My absolute favorite is Soap & Paper Factory, sold at Bel Mondo Home. The candle and room spray are called Roland Pine, and the scent is a mix of Siberian Fir, pine and cilantro. I even mist my bed linens at night with it.”