

More are giving their homes a festive look

Do you have your rooster-tail feather Christmas tree yet? How about your inflatable Santa on a motorcycle? Consumers are spending more to decorate their homes for the holidays this year, and a range of stores, including Home Depot Inc. and Saks Fifth Avenue, are rushing to accommodate them.

"This year, you're seeing a lot more people entertaining in their homes, which is pushing up the number of people buying more expensive decorations," said Britt Beemer, chairman of America's Research Group.

Consumers who said they would spend between \$101 and \$250 to decorate for Christmas jumped to 18.3 percent this year, from 6.5 percent last year, according to a recent survey conducted by America's Research Group. The number of those polled who said they would spend \$251 to \$350 on decorations increased to 4.9 percent this year, from 1.7 percent last year.

Home Depot doubled its floor space for holiday decorations this year and is stocking more than four times the holiday decor it had last year. Popular items include inflatable decor, including a 60-inch inflatable Santa on a motorcycle with a snowman in his sidecar that sells for \$80, and a 96-inch inflatable carousel, which actually moves, for \$170.

Novelty trees are big sellers, too. Last year's favorite, the upside-down artificial tree, is available at Home Depot and Target Corp., among other places. Target also offers a 36-inch rooster-tail feather tree made of red and green feathers for \$79.99. Rooster-tail feather wreaths and garlands are also available.

Avid coupon clippers take heed.

This year, many holiday shoppers are bolstering their savings by heading online, where Web sites devoted to coupons abound.

Consumers can retrieve savings online immediately with a special offer code or print out coupons to redeem in stores. These can be valuable as last-minute shoppers run out of time to send gifts by snail mail.

A quick Internet search turns up a number of options, such as Dealcatcher.com, Dealpass.com and Couponmountain.com. There's also Fabu.com, which offers deals from 308 retailers, including 16 percent off at Finish Line Inc. and 10 percent off at Target Corp. and Toys "R" Us Inc.

"Why should people have to pay full price when they have an option not to?" said Michael Yack, who founded the Toronto-based Fabu.com in 1999.

Yack said traffic has soared 75 percent since the day after Thanksgiving, the start of the Christmas shopping season.

There are also deals available through well-known search engines such as Yahoo! Shopping and Google, which enables users to find and print coupons from merchants listed in an index of local businesses.

You might not be able to give your true love a partridge in a pear tree this holiday season, but some organic pears might be nice. Food gifts, always popular during the holidays, are booming this year.

"Customers are spending more money, they seem to be ready to celebrate, ready to spend for the holidays," said Bill Ihle, executive vice president at food retailer Harry and David.

Organic pears, offered this year for the first time for \$34.95 per box, have been "hugely popular," according to Ihle. The company's trademark holiday gift towers, which range from \$29.95 to \$299.95, and can include fruit, nuts, candy, meat and cheeses are also receiving a "strong response," Ihle said.

Meanwhile, Chelsea Market Baskets, a specialty foods retailer in New York, has seen sales increases following a holiday last year marred by a subway strike. Specialty items that are hard to find elsewhere, such as hand-rolled Rugelach, a pastry, and the company's own brand, Chelsea Sweets, are big sellers.

A "European Treats" basket is popular this year, said Carrie Goff, director of operations. The basket contains foods imported from Europe, including Scottish oat crumble cookies and shortbread and Belgian Leonidas chocolate that retails for \$59.

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