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Some simple christmas cake decorations

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THE last few weeks before Christmas are so busy for the housewife that she will welcome these ideas for decorating the Christmas cake effectively in a short space of time.

For these ideas, Royal icing, icing bags, nozzles and other cake decorating paraphernalia are not necessary. Merely buy some ready-made almond paste (if you like it) and plastic icing, or make your own from the simple recipes given below.

The Christmas cake should be made several weeks before Christmas to allow time for thorough blending and mellowing of flavours. It need not be iced until a week or two before as if covered too soon the cake may stain the icing and spoil the appearance. A round cake is the easiest shape to cover, and a layer of almond paste or marzipan, though not absolutely necessary, makes the plastic icing easier to apply.

Almond Paste (Optional)
Mix together half pound almond meal or ground almonds and half pound icing sugar. Work to a stiff dough with an egg white, a teaspoon of pure almond essence and a little brandy. Knead until smooth. (Home grown almonds finely minced or grated in a mouli grater may be used, with some bitter almonds to improve the flavour if liked). See Farm and Home, Journal of Agriculture, March, 1960, for other almond paste recipes.

Covering Cake with Almond Paste
Trim off any burnt pieces of fruit. (If cake is too brown, rub on grater to remove burnt surface). Plug any large fruit holes with paste and smooth over the surface. Generally it is the base of the cake that is iced, as it is smoother than the top. Brush this with beaten egg white, warmed golden syrup, or pureed and thinned jam to make paste stick. (Do not brush sides yet). Dust the rolling surface and pin with icing sugar and roll a piece of paste to the size of the top of the cake and about $\frac{3}{8}$ in. thick. If cake is too small, lift paste on to it, but for a bigger cake it may be easier to place the cake on the paste, press firmly, then lift both together. Trim edges if necessary. (See that the rolling surface has enough icing sugar over it to prevent paste sticking—loosen with a long knife or spatula if necessary.

Roll a strip of paste as wide as the sides of the cake, brush sides of cake as before,
and roll cake on to the strip of paste till sides are covered. The sides may also be covered by lifting two or three pieces of paste on to the cake. Sometimes only the top of the cake is covered with almond paste. Return cake to board or stand, smooth the edges and joins, and allow at least a day for paste to dry before covering with plastic icing, as the almond oil may stain the icing.

**Plastic Icing (Simple Recipe)**

1 lb. sifted icing sugar.
1 egg white.
1 tablespoon liquid glucose.
1 teaspoon copha.

Melt glucose and copha over hot water, and stir with the egg white in to the icing sugar. Stir in as much sugar as possible, then turn onto a board and knead thoroughly until smooth. A little lemon and almond essences may be used for flavouring, and a drop of blue food colouring or from a laundry blue knob helps make white icing a good "colour." Avoid vanilla as it tends to give icing a "dingy" colour.

For more plastic icing recipes, see Farm and Home, Journal of Agriculture, July-August, 1954.

When icing is smooth, cover and leave to cool thoroughly. Using it to cover a cake before it is cool leads to surface cracks as it cools and contracts.

If using bought plastic icing, knead to make it pliable, and if it feels too soft, knead more icing sugar in to it.

**Cake Board**

Three-ply "maisonite," or very stiff cardboard are suitable. The board should be at least one inch bigger all round than the cake. (It is not absolutely necessary to have a round board for a round cake—quite often the corners of a square board lend themselves for decoration, candles, etc.). The board can be raised a little for better appearance and easier handling by tacking two strips of wood underneath, far enough in from the edges so that they are not visible. Cover the board with greaseproof paper where the cake will be, and the parts that will be visible with paper doyleys or other fancy paper covered with cellophane, or aluminium foil. Secure underneath with sticky tape. If liked, the exposed parts of the board can be covered with coloured sugar or coconut, "hundreds and thousands," etc. (These would be applied after the cake has been fixed and covered). Brush board with sugar and water syrup first to make the covering stick firmly.

**Covering Cake with Plastic Icing**

Place cake in the middle of the stand or board. See that the cake, board, rolling surface and pin are free from cake crumbs or hard specks of icing which could spoil the finished appearance. Brush around the lower half of the edges of the cake with egg white, jam or syrup. Knead a small piece of icing then form it into a roll, about finger thickness. Check that cake is in the centre of the board, then fix in position with this roll of icing. It should fit right around the cake. Press firmly into bottom of cake, then smooth icing upwards, so that sides of the cake slope slightly outwards. Check that the top of the cake is level, and if necessary prop up with a wedge of greaseproof paper or a piece of almond paste or plastic icing. If the sides of the cake shrank in while in the oven, it may be necessary to use a second roll of icing to obtain an outward slope for the sides. This sloping side is easier to decorate than a vertical one. Use icing sugar to prevent fingers sticking while smoothing the sides.

Brush over whole cake with egg white or jam as before, and if almond paste was not used, plug any large fruit holes with icing. If almond paste was used, brush with egg white to seal the almond oil from the plastic icing.

Measure cake roughly with rolling pin, then knead icing and roll to shape, large enough to cover top and sides in one piece about \( \frac{1}{4} \) in. thick, allowing for a little stretching. Use enough icing sugar on the rolling surface to prevent plastic icing sticking. With a small cake it may be possible to swing icing up on to cake, but a large sheet of icing must be lifted over the rolling pin. Pick up and place on cake quickly, to avoid stretching and pulling into holes. Too much rolling and re-rolling of the icing means that more and more
sugar is incorporated, making it less pliable, more crumbly and harder to manage. Do not use cornflour at this stage, as this would prevent icing sticking to cake also the decorations sticking to the plastic icing.

Smooth icing on to the cake, starting from the centre and working outwards so that air bubbles are pushed to the edge. When top is smooth, work down the sides, easing out any air and the fullness. Cut around edge of cake to trim off surplus and carefully remove it. Place this icing upside down and remove any specks before kneading it together for further use. Dust hands with icing sugar and lightly rub cake till surface is smooth, then, if liked, polish with a little cornflour. For a square cake, the surplus at the corners must be cut away, then edges pressed together and smoothed. An air bubble may be opened with a small slit, then when air is pushed out the edges pushed together and smoothed over again. Try to have surface as smooth as possible to give free scope for decoration. A bumpy surface restricts decoration in that you will try to hide a flaw with a trimming! Set cake aside and make decorations.

**Decoration—Cut Out Icing**

Simple yet effective trimmings can be cut from thinly rolled pieces of coloured plastic icing. Divide the remaining plastic icing into several pieces and knead various food colourings in to them. More colours can be obtained by kneading a little of two colours together—pink and blue to obtain mauve, yellow and blue for green, yellow and pink to make apricot, etc. Brown can be obtained from cocoa. If preferred, the design can be done all in white then colours painted on after all the icing is dry.

To make the design on the cake illustrated, cut strips from thinly rolled icing about ⅜ in. wide and 2½ in. long. These form the candles, and can be either placed flat directly on to the cake, or placed over a skewer or pencil (dusted with cornflour) to dry in a curved, more realistic shape. The holly leaves were cut from green plastic icing. These can also be placed flat on the cake, or be bent along the mid-vein and carved. Allow to dry leaning against an upturned glass or over a skewer, and leave till really firm before arranging on cake. Roll a few tiny balls to represent holly berries, and paint with red nail varnish. (Or use artificial berries or silver cachoux. Real red is hard to obtain in liquid food colours—the addition of more colour only makes a deeper pink). Veins can be marked in on the leaves with the back of a knife, or may be painted on after the leaf is dry. Tiny tear-drop shaped pieces of icing attached to the candles represent the melted wax running down the candle, and similar shapes in yellow represent the flame. These can be tinted with a little red when dry. The decorations can be attached to the cake by brushing with a little syrup (made from a teaspoon of icing sugar and a few drops of water.)

Finish the sides of the cake by tying a wide ribbon or cake frill around it, or decorating with circles of plastic icing to represent bunches of balloons. Cut small circles from thinly rolled plastic icing, or roll tiny balls and press flat to coin sizes, then stick on to sides of cake, overlapping each other. The balloon strings can be painted on with a small brush and a little food colouring.

Ideas for this cut-out or patchwork icing decoration can be taken from Christmas cards (and for other celebrations from birthday, Easter, Valentine cards, etc.). Choose bold, simple outline designs with a minimum of fussy detail. Fir trees, bells, balloons, Christmas stockings and Father Christmas’s bag of gifts are all suitable. Wrapped sweets could represent parcels spilling out, or flat squares of icing could be used. With a little imagination and ingenuity countless designs could be devised.

**Fruit Decoration**

A very quick yet effective cake decoration can be obtained from crystallised fruit. A circle of pineapple can represent a flower, with a cherry in the centre and pieces of angelica for stems and leaves. Pieces of apricot, peach and pear, also dates, raisins and figs can be cut into various shapes and arranged with nuts on the cake. Do not be tempted to overload the cake—keep the size of the design in proportion with the size of the cake.
Arrange fruit first on a flat plate, then when you are satisfied with the design, arrange on the cake, sticking each piece with a little syrup if necessary. Dust over the completed design with a little castor sugar, and top with a toy Father Christmas, an artificial holly spray, or a bow of Christmas ribbon tied to a toothpick. **Toys and Ornaments**

Many little ornaments that are available at Christmas time are suitable for decorating the Christmas cake. A toy sleigh could be filled with nuts and sweets, or a small tableau arranged with fir tree, toy Father Christmas or Nativity scene—all short-time ideas as well as effective.

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**KEROSENE REFRIGERATORS CAN BE DANGEROUS**

Fires caused by exploding kerosene refrigerators have damaged or destroyed many homes in recent years. Most often the fires are simply a result of neglect to properly maintain and care for the refrigerator.

It has been found that the most common causes of kerosene refrigerator fires are dirty flues, leaking tanks, chipped lamp glasses, dirty burners and careless filling of the tank.

There are four simple rules for maintenance, these are:

1. Inspect the flue pipe often and clean it regularly with a flue brush.
2. Keep the tank about three-quarters full. Top it up often but never above seven-eighths full.
3. Fit a new wick rather than attempt to patch or repair a damaged one.
4. Trim the wick regularly by cleaning off the carbon deposits.

A good plan is to turn the refrigerator off once a week so that the burner can be cleaned and checked. The job only takes about 10 minutes and with the cooling period is long enough for the weekly defrosting.

Dust which collects behind the refrigerator is a fire hazard and should be cleaned away regularly.

A spare lamp glass and wick should be kept for immediate replacement if needed. The glass must fit perfectly, have no chips and must be kept clean. When a new wick is fitted it should be burned off level with the burner. This is done by feeding the wick up through the burner. It must be kept straight and then turned down until it projects at least one-eighth of an inch all around the top. Dip the projecting part in kerosene and light it in a draught free place. When the flame goes out wipe the ash off with a straight edge object. Put the burner into the tank and let the kerosene soak into the wick for about an hour before lighting it. The result should be an even burning flame.

**Position of the Refrigerator**

A cool and draught free place is best for the refrigerator and it should stand perfectly level. The back should be about two inches away from the wall.

**Filling the Tank**

The kerosene font in the tank must be clean and free from water. The tank should be filled with lighting kerosene and a funnel and pump kept solely for the purpose.

**If the Flue Smokes**

If the flue smokes it should be turned down. If it continues to smoke the burner probably needs cleaning as the flame could burn back into the tank. (This could also happen if the glass is chipped.)

Remember that proper care and attention to maintenance of the kerosene refrigerator could prevent a destructive fire.

—Health Education Council of Western Australia.