



Buy better, buy less

NICOLE BITTAR talks to decorating guru and homewares store owner Tara Dennis about her top tips for decorating, maintenance, lifestyle choices and craft projects for the whole family

What are the key decorating trends for new-home buyers?

I'm all about starting with good classic pieces. Buy the best you can afford at the time. If that's Ikea, then that's OK. Just make sure you go for good neutral colours that you can key up or down, according to the seasons. Go for comfort and size. A lot of people forget to measure before they go into a place. I've seen a few disasters where people can't get a sofa through the door. Working out a wish list and budget, room by room, is a really good thing. I'm about not spending all your money just on a television; get yourself a decent sofa that's comfortable. And also spend your money on a decent bed and good pillows. So buy the best mattress you can afford, because you're hopefully going to be spending a lot of time there.

How can home owners achieve the luxe look on a budget?

Everyone perceives luxury in different ways. On some things you think you have to spend a lot of money, but it's not always like that.

It's about being tasteful with your design and not garish. And I think scale is important. I suggest to people when they have small homes to scale things up, which sounds contradictory. You think 'small rooms, fill them with lots of little pieces', but it doesn't look very luxurious when you do that.

Sometimes luxury is in a big piece that's like a lovely big modular sofa with a couple of great cushions and a good, big artwork and maybe a small, round coffee table with a lovely vase on it. That to me is luxury because there's not a lot of clutter, things are over-scaled, and your eye can move around the room.

Have a couple of good things in there, like it could be one good rug: that's your splurge. It could be one good artwork: that's your splurge. That has a perception of luxury; touch me-feel me things are always luxurious.

What are your top tips to time-poor working couples and young parents for keeping a home pristine, inviting, warm and fresh?

No clutter, if you can help it. Less is more. I constantly say to people: 'tidal'. If something comes in, something must go. I've got a basket at home for clothes or whatever in the house; it could be stuff for in the kitchen. And it goes to



the charity shop. So I've always got that basket there. If I come in with a new blouse, I take something out and pop it in there. You have to be ruthless.

In this day and age, we live in a very material society, and things are so affordable now. It is the curse of the times: having too much stuff.

We tend to think we need all this stuff, but we actually don't, and I think when you're time poor, you need the basics, not a lot of stuff. 'Buy better, buy less' is a good mantra to have. People think: 'I need a hundred cushions on my bed'. You don't. Spend your money on a couple of good ones. Also have good systems and storage; things like storage tubs in your cupboards and pantry. Get yourself set up by having some good plastic tubs and square stackable tubs, so you open your pantry and everything is neat and tidy; you can see things at a glance. That applies to your bathroom cabinets for all your toiletries; it applies to your wardrobe.

The same principles apply from room to room. It's about setting up systems from the get-go and maintaining those systems. The minute they get out of control, then you've got to spend a whole weekend tidying up and getting things back in order, and you don't want to be doing that. You want to be out, going for a walk or having dinner. So if you're starting from a blank slate, spend a bit of money on storage and organisation. You can go to Bunnings or Kmart and get some really good things like that, and baskets with lids for the lounge room for magazines. Hide the clutter and have

less of it. It's a good way to save time and also helps your head stay clear.

How can beautiful interiors be maintained, given the wear and tear, the thrills and spills, of family living?

A lot of them aren't, and I can say that from first-hand experience! It's about encouraging good behaviour from a young age. You can't expect your child to keep their bedroom tidy if they don't have a system. Set up a system for them to maintain: a box for the Lego with a lid on it; good drawers, and sort their clothes. Kids grow so fast ... they're churning through the clothes. So as they're going through different sizes, that 'basket by the door' mentality is good ... and get to the op shop at a later stage. So I think it's setting up each room ... and it's about encouraging your family. If you're going into your room, take your shoes with you. Don't leave your footy boots by the door; put them away. It's a little bit military, but I think if you're a busy family, you need to be that way. I live in a relaxed house, honestly, but you have to delegate because you end up being a stresshead.

It's like on the weekends: 'Well I'm here cleaning up the whole house and you lot are out there having a great time and I'm cleaning up your mess.' It just causes angst in the family and you don't want that.

'Pick up your towels, hang them back up; why do I sound like a nag all the time?' I've got a nine-year-old boy and he just rolls his eyes. And it's not easy. I don't stand up here like Mother Teresa.

It's as hard for me as anyone else, but I do think the amount of stuff you have in your house doesn't help. Don't have a linen cupboard full of towels; have three good towels. Have less and stay on top of it. I try to encourage everyone to do their bit. If I've got some time on a Sunday afternoon, I will spend two or three hours getting ready for the week, knowing that we have sport on this day, so I'll make sure the washing's laid out so we don't have that the night before 'Where are my socks? That kind of business, because that's stressful for getting out the door and I'm usually never there when it's happening, so I don't want it to fall on them. I don't plan meals as such, but that is something I aspire to do. I go to some people's houses and they have a note on their fridge door with all the meals for the week, such as 'Shepherd's pie on Tuesday' and I think that's actually really good because then I'd know what to shop for. I haven't got to that yet, but I think: plan it and be organised as much as you can. And nagging always works.

If money were no object, what products or items would you install in a new home, and why?

I live quite simply. I don't perceive lovely homes as spending millions of dollars. We live in a little cabin on the river and I'm so happy with that. I think smaller for me is better as it's less to maintain. I'd prefer spending a bit more money on better fabrics, a good sound system or a couple of really nice lamps: not much. I always say that when I'm a really old lady, I don't want to hand my kids my

Delightful, spring-like touches in these gorgeous homewares from the Tara Dennis range freshen your interior accents.



Tara Dennis (above) is an ambassador for Reed Gift Fairs, which typically feature rustically appealing wares, such as these offerings from Indigo Love Collectors.



thimble collection. (Instead I want it to be) a good piece of art, a great chair (like a Hans Wegner) and a box of photos. That's it. It's all I want to give to my kids, rather than inherit all of my rubbish.

So I'm paring down. I used to be like why, when people get older, do they start to live in these really modern houses, such as the ones you see on *Grand Designs*. You see a really old couple who've lived in this amazing little cottage all their lives and they've gone from having all the Beatrix Potter characters to having just surfaces and really great art and sofa and, I'm like: 'OK, I get that now'. As you get older, you want to streamline, you want less, but better. At the moment, I would love a Martine Emdur. I love her stuff. I'm a blue girl. I love blues and she does these great water paintings. Larry's a friend of mine, her brother, and he's got a piece that I've always coveted and every time I go to his house, I'm like: 'I love that piece'. You just get lost in her water, so I'd have a really great Martine Emdur painting and not much else. It would be nice to have a really great house overlooking the ocean with a patch of grass. That would be aspirational. I'd rather what's going on outside than inside. And good natural light is always important.

What craft projects do you expect will be popular over summer?

I just did a great day workshop with an artist called Jacqui Fink from Little Dandelion. She knits with these needles that are like plumbing pipes, huge, and she gets this wool that is crafted in

they say: 'Oh my God, that's an awesome rug. Where did you get that?' When I say 'I actually made that', they reply 'Get out of here'.

Harry, my son, teaches me craft. He wants to be a pilot and he gets pieces of paper and sticky tape and builds

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New Zealand, the thickest wool ever. She does these big chunky oversized throws: amazing. And she does a lot of corporate installations; she's just done the Dubai Opera House. Again, graphic, large, and I love that she's been able to take a very traditional Nanna craft and make it super cool. A couple of years ago, I got a massive crochet hook and I did this circular rug for my bedroom floor out of cotton sash cord that I got from Bunnings and I love it, because again it's that same overscale traditional craft. When you say 'I crochet', people go [rolls eyes] ... but when they see my rug,

aeroplanes. I say 'Harry, you're going to have to have to stop building this stuff because I've got nowhere to put it'. We're mooting the idea of getting a kiln, because I want to do ceramics like little bowls and Christmas decorations, so I'm thinking that might be my new craft and Harry would be pretty keen on doing that. We'll do air-dried clay; he loves moulding. So I think summer craft will be all about aeroplanes, predominantly for Harry, and things for the house for me. Nice things. I love having things that we've made at home together.

Final words of advice?

I think a lot of people get caught up with the trends of worrying about what's in season and 'Will I be on trend?' I don't worry about that. I say to be happy: just live simply so your family is comfortable.

'Buy better, buy less' is such a good mantra; you don't need it all. Really think about what you need because you don't need as much as you think you do. It can add a lot of stress. If you don't know where to go in a room, I say: pull it all out. Put everything outside, if it's a sunny day, on a drop sheet and only put back in the room what you think you really need and love. With the rest of it, think: can you change it, adapt it, give it away, do you need it? A home has to be lived in; it's not this place that causes you stress. If you want to be a trendsetter, just add a few little accents. You don't need much to keep it fresh and current. Most of all, make it a comfortable place for your family and make it who you are, rather than what you see in the magazines. ■

Tara Dennis was a guest at the Reed Gift Fair, which was held at the Melbourne Convention and the Exhibition Centre in August. For more tips, visit taradennis.com.au