**Fourth of July Decorating Ideas**

Red, white, and blue are the colors for Independence Day. Don't worry about decorating the inside of your house. Stick with your patio and backyard since that's where most of the activities take place.

**Funny, Fuzzy Flip Flops**

Turn ordinary flip flops, thongs … whatever you want to call them into favors for guests to take home. Get an assortment of different sizes in -- what else -- red, white and blue.

Wrap red, white and blue yarn around a cardboard rectangle until it's about half an inch thick. Remove the rectangle and tie the loops together tightly at one end. Cut the loops at the other end to form a fuzzy yarn pompom. Use the loose end to tie to the flip flop.

**Star Garland**

As easy as making paper dolls. Fold large sheet of colored paper into an accordion, with each square being about 4 to 6 inches square. Cut a star shape leaving one side attached When you unfold the accordion the stars remain attached to each other. Decorate the stars with glue glitter or stickers.

**Star-spangled Lollipops**

Another easy and quick decoration. Attach patriotic-themed paper plates to a wooden dowel with a hot glue gun, one to each side. Tie a bow where the dowel comes out from the plate. Use to decorate potted plants, line a walkway, or around the border of a patio.

**Faux Sparklers**

Cut a package of crepe paper in half length wise. Cut the halves in one inch strips, but leave about an inch at the bottom of the paper whole. Do not cut all the way through.

Unfold and lay flat. Cut strips of aluminum foil the same length and width as the crepe paper strips. Lay the aluminum foil strips on the crepe paper about every 6 inches or so. Roll up the crepe paper and foil.

Gather the uncut end into a tight roll and fasten with a rubber band. Attach to a wooden skewer. Fan out the strips.

**Star Straws**

Buy foil star stickers that are about 3 inches -- more or less- in diameter. Attach half the stars to poster board. Cut out the stars. Place the star on the back of a plastic straw about 2 inches from the top. Glue with white glue. Turn the straw over. Press another star sticker on the straw and the back of the first star.

**Light Jugs**

Fill plastic gallon jugs with water, the kind that milk or water comes in. Tempera paints mix easily with water. Add enough red tempera paint to brightly color the water but not turn it opaque. Do the same with blue paint and leave a few plain. Place a cheap mini flashlight in the opening other jug. When you turn on the flashlight it lights up the water.

**Summer Picnic Menu: Smooshed Sandwiches**

Let your children help with this easy summer picnic menu. And yes, the sandwiches are actually smooshed. Even the littlest child can help with this menu. Start off with seven layer bean dip and chips, followed by a hearty sub sandwich accompanied by easy coleslaw, and ice cold lemonade. Children should always be supervised around food and of course knifes. Have them wash their hands thoroughly before beginning. Now get going on the fun.

What makes this seven layer bean dip different is everyone gets their own serving in a plastic cup. Set out an 8 ounce clear plastic cup for each person. Fill the bottom with about an inch of shredded lettuce, it will compress as the other ingredients are added and won't take up as much space. Add chopped tomatoes and a one inch thick layer of refried beans patted down so it's evenly covers the tomatoes. Layer on slices of avocado or guacamole, a couple of tablespoons of your favorite prepared salsa, topped with a few tablespoons of sour cream and a covering of shredded cheese. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate. Serve with an individual bag of corn chips for each person and fork to get every morsel. Keep a few extra bags of chips on hand.

Make the sandwich the day before so the flavors have time to blend. Split a loaf of crust bread horizontally. Remove some of the bread from each half by pulling it out with your fingers. This is a good job for the kids. Just keep an eye on them so they don't remove all the bread down to the crust. You're aiming for a nice shallow depression in both halves so more filling can fit in.

Sprinkle each half with olive oil and freshly ground black pepper. Dribble fresh lemon juice, no more than 1/2 teaspoon on each side. Layer on sliced tomatoes, cucumbers, green peppers, sliced olives, and red onions. Push them gently down in the depression. Layer on roast beef, and cheddar cheese. Or baked ham and pepper jack cheese. Try sliced turkey and Swiss cheese. If you're adventuresome, use all the fillings. Put the other half of bread on the top of the fillings and press down. Wrap firmly in plastic wrap, in aluminum foil and then in a zip locked bag. You might have to cut the sandwich in half to fit in the zip locked bag.

Place the securely wrapped sandwiches in a roasting pan. Place a cookie sheet over the sandwiches. Put weights on the cookie sheet to press down the sandwiches. Or place a towel over the sandwich. Place on a hard surface, such as a wooden chair and have a child sit on the towel and smoosh down the sandwich for about 10 minutes. For some reason children find this hysterically funny. Then put the sandwiches in the roasting pan and weigh them down. Don't unwrap the sandwiches until you're ready to eat.

Easy coleslaw and it really is easy. 1/2 cup of mayonnaise, 1 teaspoon celery seed, 1/4 cup of cider vinegar, 1/4 cup sugar all whisked together until blended. Open a large zip lock bag. Place 1/2 large package of shredded cabbage in the bag and 1/2 the dressing. Zip the bag and shake. Then add the remaining cabbage and dressing. Zip the bag and give it a few more good shakes.

Use your favorite frozen lemonade mix. Add a festive touch with a few garnishes such as sliced strawberries, mint leaves, sliced cucumbers, or fresh basil leaves. Freeze individual strawberries, mint leaves, or lemon slices in ice cube trays and serve a few special cubes in each glass.

**4 Tips For Terrific Summer Picnics and Parties**

There's nothing like that feeling of anticipation as you drive to the lake, woods, or park for the first summer picnic. Your pulse quickens; you know that no matter what happens, it will be a memorable experience, one that will stay with you a long time. You look forward to this day all week; thinking about it helps get you through the long dreary days at work.

**1. Keep it simple.** Recipes with too many ingredients, or those that require precision cooking techniques, don't work well at a picnic. Leave the crystal, china and linen table cloths to the royal family. You want to be able to socialize while you are cooking, not worry about whether the sauce you are making is up to Culinary Institute standards, or whether your ribs could place high in the national barbecue championships in Memphis.

**2. Don't be afraid to attempt new dishes.** The beginning picnicker might want to stick to the basics - hamburgers, hot dogs, steaks perhaps. But why not bring some exciting innovations to your food? There are many wonderful books on backyard grilling that can give you ideas on how to vary your menu. A word of caution, try only one or two new dishes than round out the menu with your favorite standbys or even purchased salads and side dishes.

**3. Prepare as much ahead as you can.** You can put the spice rubs or marinades on your meat dishes the night before. Then at the picnic or beach just take the meat out of the cooler and get it on the grill. In general, longer marinating time results in more flavorful meat. In the morning before you leave, you can get most of the prep work done-cutting, seasoning, etc. Let's say you are making your patented pork chili dish. You can have all the ingredients ready and put in their own containers or plastic bags, so all you have to do when you get to the game is get the chili pot warm on the grill, pop open the containers and add the ingredients together.

**4. Keep Hot Foods Hot and Cold Foods Cold**

Cheap Styrofoam coolers can be used to keep your hot dishes hot traveling from home or at the picnic site. Pack crumbled newspapers around the containers to keep them from sliding and as an added layer of insulation. Use separate coolers for drinks, perhaps one cooler for adult beverages and another for soft drinks, water, and juice. Fill with ice right before leaving. Cold food could be kept in Styrofoam coolers as well. Put a layer of ice cubes in the bottom of the cooler, the food and then cover with ice cubes. Block ice lasts much longer than cubes but can be difficult to maneuver around to get at the food. If you are using a cooler rather than Styrofoam cooler, fill with six inches of ice cubes at least an hour before packing with food. This precools the cooler.

**More Grilling Safety Tips**

Food safety precautions begin while you're still at the grocery store. If you plan on spending a lot of time at the grocery store that day, purchase the meat last, right before you are ready to check out, so it can remain as chilled as possible for the trip home. While shopping pick up a few of the handiwipes that are offered to wipe off the handles of the shopping cart. Use them to wipe off your hands after you've picked up chicken, pork, or fish.

If you live in a hot climate place the meat, frozen vegetables and diary items in a cooler for the ride home. This is especially important if you plan on completing another errand, such a picking up the kids at swim club after shopping. Even with the air conditioner the back seat can start to get warm. Keep in mind none of the air conditioned air reaches the trunk.

Meat should be refrigerated immediately when you get home, in the coldest part of the refrigerator or in the meat compartment. If you purchase frozen beef, it should be defrosted overnight in the refrigerator, not a room temperature. The same goes for chicken or turkey. If the poultry is large, over 15 pounds, you can jump start the defrosting by immersing the still wrapped turkey in the bathtub or large kitchen sink filled with cold water. Don't use hot. The hot will raise the outside of the turkey to unsafe levels while the inside still is frozen. After an hour remove the poultry from the water and let it finish defrosting in the refrigerator.

Remember to wash your hands before and after you handle raw meat or poultry. In the kitchen, don't use the same work surface, cutting board, etc. to get the raw meat or poultry ready for the grill as you do for other foods. If more than one person is in the kitchen during the prep stage, make sure you coordinate with them so you know which utensils and which surfaces have come in contact with raw meat or poultry.

Trimming excess fat from meat can help avoid flare-ups during the grilling process. This can have three benefits: leaner meat is healthier for you and your guests, a flare-up can potentially burn and ruin the dinner you've so carefully planned and prepared, and can be dangerous for the outdoor chef as well. The risk being burned while grilling can also be lessened by using long handled tongs and spatulas.

If you are grilling other items along with the meat, make sure they do not come in contact with the meat while it is in a raw state. Give the meat and the other items their own separate zones on the grill. Use separate tongs or spatulas to handle these items. When the meat is ready to be removed from the grill, put it on a fresh, or freshly washed, platter and use a fresh set of tongs or spatulas to handle it. Make sure you wash all utensils, cutting boards and your counter tops after they have come in contact with raw meat or poultry.

It is also important to refrigerate leftovers from grilling promptly. Don't leave them on the counter top, at room temperature, for very long after you have finished eating.