



Welcome home for Christmas

Light up your front door for the festive season with **Kevin Smith's** stylish projects. Photos by Paul Debois

There's something magical about Christmas lights, and little beats the December twilight hours when neighbourhoods the length and breadth of the country transform into sparkling spectacles. Displays seem to get more elaborate every year with illuminated reindeer, flashing Father Christmases and inflatable snowmen, all making an appearance on my street.

I prefer to keep things simple though, and use plants, containers and berries gathered from the garden for the base of my display. I only use one colour of light, too, and reckon less is definitely more if you're after a sophisticated look.

Restricting your palette still allows plenty of scope for creativity. There's a huge range of different lights suitable for outdoor use these days,

all of which will create a different style when combined with plants.

And why spend lots of cash on something that can only be enjoyed for a couple of weeks a year? My two container projects will look good after the lights have been removed, meaning they'll keep your doorstep looking smart all the way through to next winter. These pots aren't just for Christmas.



Berry bright

If you like rustic charm and relaxed planting, this berry inspired container recipe is for you

This container display is an explosion of evergreen plants for those who like things to have an informal touch. With a traditional holly bush at the centre, and red berry lights to give a bit of sparkle, it couldn't be more festive. You should find all the plants at your local nursery and it's possible to plant these skimmias and stipas in the garden when they outgrow the display. *Read more about holly in Alan's feature on page 46.*

We used:

- 1 x *Ilex aquifolium* (around £8 for a 2-litre pot)
- 3 x *Stipa tenuissima* 'Pony Tails' (around £4 for a plant in a 1-litre pot)
- 3 x *Skimmia japonica* (around £5 for a 1.5-litre pot)
- 30cm terracotta pot (around £10 from most garden centres)
- Crocks or polystyrene for drainage
- John Innes Potting Compost No.3 (around £4 for a 10-litre bag)
- 1 x control-release fertiliser tablet (around £4 for 25)
- Noma 120 red outdoor static berry lights (£37.99, Christmastimeuk, 01427 667 270, www.christmastimeuk.com)

Safety first – buy carefully

It's vital to buy lights that are safe for outdoor use, which usually means they'll have a transformer between the plug and the first light of the string. The transformer converts the electricity to a lower voltage, suitable to use outside, and must be positioned indoors. The wire on the 'outdoor' side of the transformer will be thin enough to pass through a window or door for a limited period, while still allowing it to close. Don't plug into outdoor sockets if the transformer will be exposed.



1 Add crocks to the pot, half fill with compost and pop in a slow-release fertiliser tablet.



2 Position the holly in the centre of the pot, making sure it is straight, and add more compost.



3 If the stipas are a little large make extra, smaller plants by dividing them with a sharp knife.



4 Plant the stipas around the edge of the container ensuring they are evenly spaced apart.



5 Add the skimmias between the stipas, backfill with more compost and water thoroughly.



6 Twine the lights through the holly and safely connect them to your power source.



TIP
Keep plants in good health by ensuring compost doesn't dry out in winter winds

Give Christmas visitors a warm welcome with this sparkling container

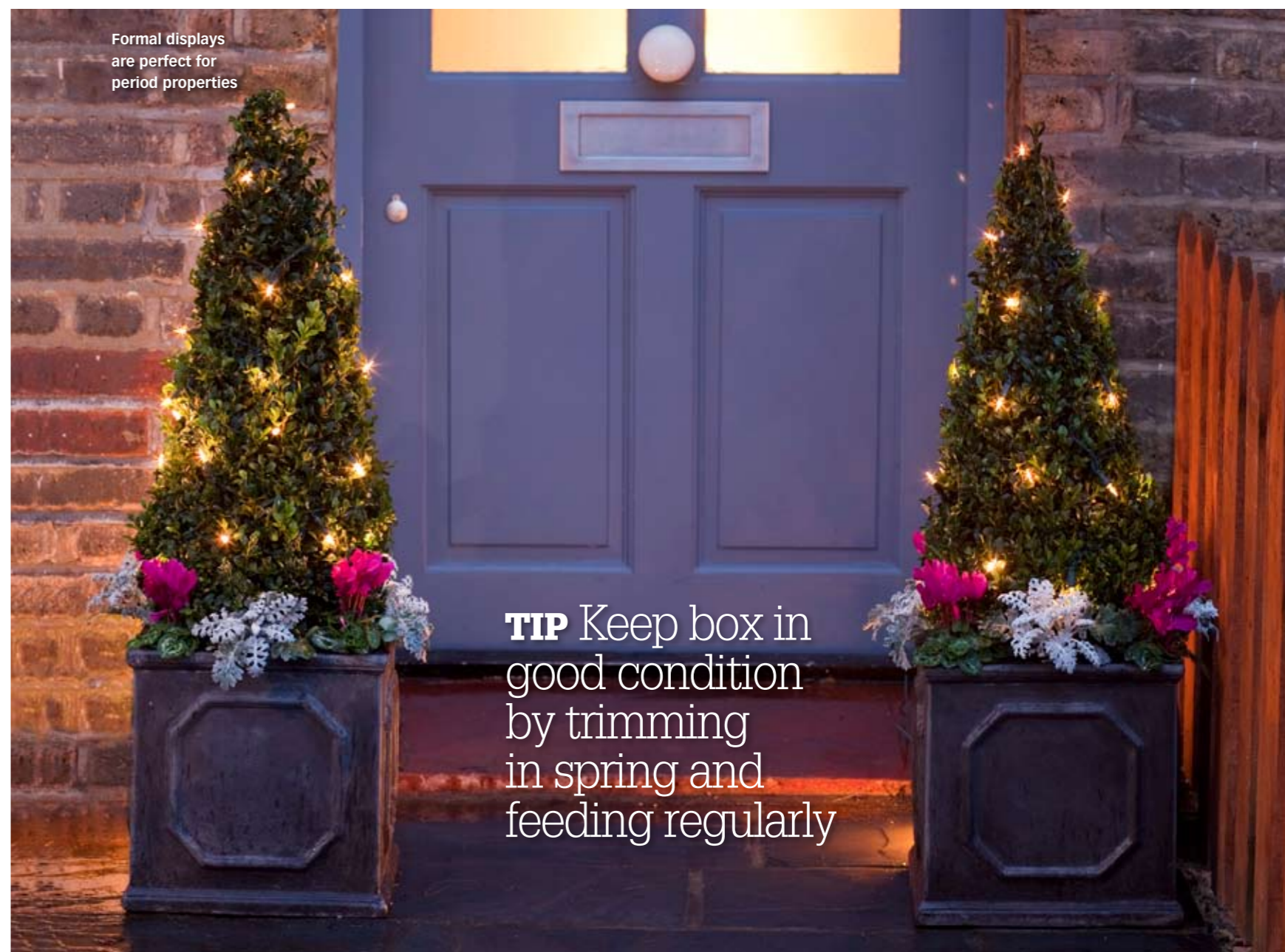
Formally festive

Bring a touch of glamour to your street with this two-pot, show-stopping display

The perfect symmetry of this scene resembles a Hollywood movie set, although it is very easy to recreate at home. The box cones and fake-lead planters may cost a bit, but you'll have them for life once you've made the initial investment. The display is perfect for a smart, city front door and you can easily replace the seasonal bedding plants to ring the changes for summer.

- We used (for two containers):**
2 x 50cm-tall box cones (around £25 each from garden centres)
8 x pink cyclamen (around £1.50 for a 9cm pot)
8 x *Senecio cineraria* (around £1.50 for a 9cm pot)
2 x 32cm Fibreclay square faux-lead planters (£19.99, Woodlodge, 01932 579 100 or www.woodlodge.co.uk for stockists)
Crocks for drainage
John Innes Potting Compost No.3 (around £4 for a 10-litre bag)
2 x controlled-release fertiliser tablets (around £4 for 25)
2 x 80 clear outdoor static fairy lights (£17.99 per set, Christmas-timeuk, 01427 667 270, www.christmastimeuk.com)

TIP If your door doesn't lend itself to a symmetrical display just plant one container



Formal displays are perfect for period properties

TIP Keep box in good condition by trimming in spring and feeding regularly



1 Put a few crocks in the base of the pots, half fill them with compost and add a fertiliser tablet to each one.



2 Plant the box cones in the centre of the pots and carefully fill around the edges with more compost.



3 Plant a *senecio* on each side of the pots, along with a cyclamen on each corner. Fill any gaps with more compost.



4 Move the containers to their final position and water them well. Try not to let the compost dry out.



5 Wrap the lights around the box cones. Make sure the bulbs are evenly spaced then connect to your power supply.



A door with style



No power source needed with battery lights

Brighten up your front door with this no-fuss decoration. It will take minutes to make and you'll find most of the ingredients in your garden

Traditional door decorations are beautiful at Christmas, although it's sometimes tricky to illuminate them. No more – with battery operated lights anything's possible, as you can add sparkle without trailing wires or a power source. This decoration couldn't be simpler or cheaper to create. It's just Christmas tree branches trimmed from the base of a tree, greenery gathered from the garden and a set of lights. We used pittosporum, miscanthus and ivy seedheads and a couple of phormium leaves.

We used:

- Christmas tree branches** (cut from the base while preparing the tree for indoors)
- Greenery, stems and seed heads** (gathered from the garden)
- Garden twine**
- Fishing line** (around £3 for 100 metres from fishing tackle or craft shops)
- 20 white battery operated LED lights** (£8.99, Christmastimeuk, 01427 667 270, www.christmastimeuk.com)

TIP Make it on a flat surface and attach the lights after hanging



1 Gather your bunch of greenery together and tie tightly with garden twine. Use the Christmas tree branches for the back and build up on top of them.



2 Hang the bunch from the top of your front door with a length of twine or fishing line. Add the lights, securing the battery pack at the top with more string.