

Hosts, guests and intruders

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Summer is a season when people travel to visit friends and family as well as make new acquaintances along the way. Hosting visitors can be one of life's most rewarding pleasures. Yet, it also has the potential to be a stressful and frightening experience. The outcome is ultimately in the hands of the host or hostess. With some careful and thoughtful planning, most of the pitfalls can be avoided.

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Planning ahead is good for both the host and guest. Summer seems to be the busiest time of year in many respects. Kids are out of school and the weather is warmer, conducive to lots of outdoor activities such as sports' events, barbecues, beach parties and camping.

Scheduling becomes necessary. It takes as much time to plan for fun times as it does for business and school appointments. When celebrations and parties are planned well in advance people have something to look forward to and distant cousins sometimes have the chance to get together, maybe even for the first time.

Surprise visits are usually not welcome. Although some people associate surprises with spontaneity, I consider unexpected guests to be unwanted intruders. This reaction is likely a throwback to my childhood where it was instilled in me to always call ahead before I would visit anyone. It's the total disregard for the other person that sets me on edge. What are people thinking who just drop in without fair warning? I don't appreciate such interruptions and I don't expect anyone else does

either. Crashing a party or showing up at someone's house without being invited is rude and disrespectful. My advice is to avoid this at all costs.

Expected house guests, however, can be a joy to prepare for. Guests always appreciate little touches. Fresh-cut flowers from the garden, a small bowl of fresh fruit or fresh towels in a bathroom are always welcoming. Although going to extra trouble comes naturally and appears effortless to some hosts, guests need to remember that their visit creates a change in the daily routine, sometimes even a bit of a disruption.

Both guests and hosts should be aware of any allergies or food aversions. Know the difference: an aversion is an inconvenience; an allergic reaction can be life-threatening.

I find the summer garden can provide special seasonal ingredients, which, when incorporated into a special meal, can add that something memorable to a lovely meal.

People who travel from other parts of the country or from foreign lands especially enjoy local favourites. Here in St. Andrews, for example, steamed lobster, mussels simmered with garlic, wine and freshly chopped tomato seem to be big hits.

If you are planning a party at home and your house guests are from out of town, I think it's always smart to inform them of any important local news such as recent deaths, illnesses, births, weddings, et cetera. An informed house guest is likely to avoid inadvertently putting his or her foot in their mouth.

It is appropriate for a guest to bring a thoughtful house present. Options include specialty foods, bottles of wine, chocolates, decorative items or collectibles known to be favourites.

I find a colourful arrangement of fresh flowers is easy and fun. I usually don't give potted plants because they aren't disposable and require ongoing care. If staying for several days, offering to prepare a special dinner for your hostess would be appropriate, especially if you have a special talent for cooking.

A small kitchen appliance, such as a coffee press or tea strainer with an assortment of teas, is a useful gift. Think about something modest in size - a unique wine stopper, decorative lemon squeezer or a small specialty kitchen tool. Your gift may be purchased during your stay once you see what your host needs, collects or wants.

The length of your stay will also determine the type of gift you give.

Following any visit, a sincere, handwritten thank you note is a surefire way to show how much you appreciated the time and trouble to which your host or hostess has gone. Handmade cards cost a few dollars more but they are sure to have a 'wow' effect, reflective of the time you have just enjoyed with your friends.

Being in sync with one another's schedule, considering special likes and dislikes and avoiding unnecessary surprises all show the respect you have for each other. I find nothing more rewarding than a well-planned and highly anticipated visit with friends and family as well as the new friendships which often emerge as a result.

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