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Floridians reshape holiday traditions

The Associated Press

ST. PETE BEACH — Trish Kelley's childhood holidays in Pennsylvania were of the greeting card variety — white and cold. She was fascinated by her mother's memories of green Christmases in Florida with palm trees aglow with lights and lush holiday shrubbery.

"In Pennsylvania we'd get a little poinsettia and everyone would kind of nurture it," Kelley said. "My mom would say in St. Petersburg they grew like bushes."

Many Floridians compensate for the state's lack of stereotypical holiday [weather](#) with an abundance of icicle lights and plastic inflatable snowmen. But Kelley is among a cadre of Floridians who are putting a tropical twist on the holidays — pushing aside pumpkin pie for key lime and decking the halls with palm fronds instead of boughs of holly.

In the Florida Panhandle fishing village of Apalachicola, Santa makes his big entrance at the annual holiday festival on a shrimp boat. Other coastal cities give parade floats a literal twist with waterfront processions of festive boats.

It's not unusual to find a faux snowman made of sand on the Gulf Coast's white sand beaches this time of year.

Kelley and her husband, Tim, decorate their front door and pineapple-themed fence with a colorful collection of lights, faux tropical fruits, sea shells, palm fronds and — in a nod to more conventional tradition — garland and evergreen branches.

"It gets a little bit different every year," said Kelley, who lives in the historic Pass-a-Grille neighborhood on St. Pete Beach. "The bleached starfish don't usually last too long. After a year or two, they start to biodegrade."

Kelley was in high school when her family moved back

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to Florida in the late 1960s. Her mother immediately resumed Florida holiday traditions, decorating windows with palm fronds decked with red ribbons.

The family tree: a podocarpus, a variety of Florida evergreen with an oval shape that distinguishes it from traditional Christmas trees.

"She always used Florida greens," Kelley said of her mother.

Jorj Morgan, a cooking and entertaining author from Fort Lauderdale, expects local holiday traditions will flourish as people become more sensitive to the environment.

"I think people do start embracing their environment the more they become attuned to it," Morgan said. "I try to freshen up and deal with what we have in here Florida because sometimes, if you don't do that, it tends to be morose. A dead pine bough on a table with some fake snow is not that cool."

Morgan, too, uses native foliage to add a Florida flourish to her holiday decor.

She carries the fresh theme to the dinner table, where a traditional prime rib is accompanied by stuffed tomatoes and other fresh Florida vegetables that thrive in South Florida's mild winters.

Morgan's traditional New Year's Eve lobster bisque also follows her native theme.

Morgan freezes a few spiny lobsters family and friends catch in the Florida Keys during the state's summer mini-lobster season.

Lobster tail shells left over from fresh lobster dinners also are frozen to make lobster stock for her winter bisque.

"For me to get a Maine lobster, I have to fly it down," Morgan said. "This way I'm able to make a lobster bisque with the things I find in my own ocean."

There is no question about the main dessert dish.

"Key lime pie is amazing," Morgan said. "People have it all over the country. But key lime pie made with fresh key limes right off the lime tree — hello — that's fabulous."

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