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# Ask Martha

*How to remove the musty smell from water-damaged books, bake a crisper piecrust, and keep a Christmas tree fresh all season.*

Every time I bake a pie, the bottom crust does not get done. Do you have any tips or suggestions?

**Garry Swackhamer**  
POWELL, OHIO

There are a few strategies that will help crisp the bottom of single- and double-crust pies. First, try placing the pie in the lower third of the oven—on the bottom rack, or the one just above it. This puts the pie closer to the heat at the base of the oven, which will cook the bottom layer. You can also use a clear glass pie dish so that you can see when your crust is completely golden on the bottom.

When making a single-crust pie, be sure to follow the recipe instructions for blind-baking, or baking the crust before filling it. This method is used when the filling doesn't need to be baked or baked as long as the crust, or when the filling will cause the crust to become soggy. The most important thing is that the crust is baked before adding the filling or it will not cook through completely. Before a crust is blind-baked, prick the dough all over with the tines of a fork; this prevents the dough from puffing up as it bakes. Then line the dough with parchment and top with a weighty substance, such as dried beans. The weight of the beans helps the dough bake evenly.



#### THE SKINNY ON WEIGHTS

When blind-baking a crust, we use dried beans (set on parchment) to weigh it down. Store-bought ceramic or metal pie weights are also an option.

For a single-crust pie with a baked filling, blind-bake the crust until the edges are pale gold and look set. Remove beans and parchment, and continue to bake until edges are golden and bottom is set and golden; with a no-bake filling, continue to bake until edges and bottom are deep golden-brown. For double-crust pies, the filling must be fully baked and bubbling in the center. In all cases, monitor the crust carefully and place aluminum foil around the edges if they're darkening too quickly.

What is the proper way to take care of stainless steel appliances?

**Sherry Kasper**  
MONTVALE, NEW JERSEY

There are a number of ways to remove residue and oily buildup and restore the gleam to appliances. A microfiber cloth made specifically for stainless steel, such as Casabella's Microfiber Stainless Steel Cloth (\$10 for 2, [casabella.com](http://casabella.com)), can clean and polish your appliances using only water. For tougher residue, Method Pro Chef Stainless Steel Cleaner (\$9, [methodhome.com](http://methodhome.com)) leaves no streaks and is nontoxic. Alternatively, apply a paste of baking soda and water, and leave overnight to dissolve stubborn burned-on oil stains.

Whichever method you choose, note the direction of the grain of the stainless steel. If you get aggressive with regular scouring pads and go against the grain, you will leave marks on your appliance.

Some of my cookbooks have been damaged by water and are musty. How can I get rid of the smell?

**Kay Chatman**  
WICHITA, KANSAS

Mold can cause a musty smell to linger. The first step, if you think the mold is active (if it appears raised or moist), is to put the books in the freezer to stop the growth. This is important because mold can migrate from page to page. If the mold seems inactive, further dry out the cookbooks somewhere with humidity below 50 percent and cooler than 70 degrees. Finding a safe place outside in the sunshine with the book open and fanned out is ideal.

Because exposure to airborne mold particles can cause serious respiratory problems, remove the mold outdoors. Wear gloves and a paper face mask or a respirator for an extra level of protection. To clean the damaged pages, cover with a mesh screen and vacuum with a HEPA filter. Adjust the suction to prevent wrinkling the page.

Once the cookbooks are cleaned, you can combat any remaining odors. Walter Newman,

of the Northeast Document Conservation Center, recommends inserting a zeolite paper (*Micro-Chamber Interleaving Paper*, \$21.95 for 100 sheets, [conservationresources.com](http://conservationresources.com)) every few pages. Leave the book undisturbed, and the odor will be absorbed in a few weeks. If your book is very precious or fragile, you should leave it in the hands of a professional conservator.

Is it true that feeding your Christmas tree a sugary substance, such as soda or maple syrup, will help it last longer?

*Emily Behlmann*  
MONTCLAIR, NEW JERSEY

As a rule of thumb, add only water to the base of your tree. Sugar, or any decomposable organic material,

creates bacteria that will cause the water to smell and your tree to decompose faster. Instead, follow a few simple rules to keep your tree happy and healthy for the holidays.

Once you have your tree home, make a fresh cut, straight across the trunk. Place the trimmed trunk in water as soon as possible—the longer the trunk is exposed to air, the less water it will be able to absorb. When you place your tree into the water, make sure the trunk's cut edges are clean and that it has not been bruised. If it is bruised, it is best to cut it again. Give the tree one quart of clean water per inch of trunk diameter. Although the temperature of the water is not important, keeping the tree away from direct sources of heat will also help keep your tree from drying out.

ASK MARTHA



#### HAVE A HEALTHIER TREE

To keep your tree green and healthy, trim the trunk and set it in water right away. Feeding the tree sweet substances to keep it alive longer is an old wives' tale.

**WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!** Send your questions to Ask Martha, c/o Letters Department, *Martha Stewart Living*, 601 West 26th Street, New York, NY 10001, or to [askmartha@marthastewart.com](mailto:askmartha@marthastewart.com). Please include your full name, address, and daytime phone number. To reach Ask Martha at SiriusXM Radio, channel 110, call 866-675-6675 or e-mail [radio@marthastewart.com](mailto:radio@marthastewart.com). Letters and messages become the property of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, Inc., and may be published, broadcast, edited, or otherwise used in any of its media. By submitting your questions to Ask Martha, you are agreeing to let us use your name and hometown in connection with our publication of your questions.



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