



It starts with an idea – a theme, a pretty picture on a page torn from a magazine, a cherished item of great or simply sentimental value. The next thing you know, you have a party.

The option to hire help with everything from cooking to cleaning up afterwards is a wonderful luxury, but it's fun sometimes to know you can do it yourself if you must – or if you really just want to. There are no hard and fast rules to throwing a successful party, according to expert party planners.

Vintage linens, mismatched china, cuttings from the backyard garden – it's all good if it's what you, the hostess, want to use.

"Make it yours and don't sweat the small stuff," advises Edward Armstrong, floral designer for the eponymous Edward on St. Simons.

Easy for an expert to say, but even experts have to start somewhere.

"I would start with an idea, whether it be an item or a theme or a date," says Stacy Bass, owner of Straton Hall catering and event planning.

You might want to peg your party to May Day or design your menu and decor around a Mardi Gras theme. Or perhaps you possess a bleached starfish that suggests a beach theme. In the end, starfish may serve no greater role than as place markers at the dinner table, but they sparked the idea.

Start simple and the ideas flow. Save the money talk for later.

"A lot of times if budget is the first thing discussed it tends to hamper our ideas or ability," Bass says.

Elegance is easy, not expensive. The key is simplicity.

For color, Armstrong suggests white and green while Bass likes rich dark reds. For flowers, the simpler the better. Hydrangeas mixed with a few roses, or even gerbera daisies, lend a look of clean sophistication to any event. Float five or six hardy blossoms in a glass or crystal bowl filled with water, or fill a fish bowl with sand and a single pillar candle, then scatter the blossoms around that.



"The flower heads last four or five hours without water and give a bright pop of color to your centerpieces," Armstrong says. "Finish the look by scattering shells and river rocks down the table."

Even an arrangement as simple as lemons and limes in a pretty crystal vase makes a striking centerpiece.

Surround your centerpiece with votive candles and you've tapped every great party planner's secret. "You can hide all kind of ugly in the dark," Bass says.

Whether hosting a cocktail party or sit-down dinner, make an hors d'oeuvre or a casserole you're known for, then buy a few dishes to complement your offering. Don't be afraid to mix and match any and everything, from serving pieces to food.

"We are blessed in this area to have great restaurants, delis and caterers," Armstrong says. "Make it easy on yourself." ■

