Holiday Decorating with Greenery

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The tradition of decorating with greenery dates back to ancient times and the celebration of the winter solstice in December. Evergreens, revered for retaining life in the dead of winter, were brought into the home to herald the lengthening days and the coming of spring. These customs have been brought forward into our current day seasonal and holiday practices.

For those who celebrate Christmas, an evergreen tree provides a fragrant focal point for holiday decorating. Western North Carolina is known for its live pre-cut Christmas trees, especially the Fraser fir which grows at higher elevations. Balsam and Douglas firs are also popular choices. Look for a tree with good color and few dried needles. Water your tree daily and keep it away from heat sources.

In addition to traditional ornaments, consider using natural items for tree decorations. Sprigs of holly interspersed throughout the branches or a garland of cranberries adds a nice punch of color. Dried orange or apple slices hung as ornaments enhance the tree’s own fragrance.

Holiday decorating goes beyond the tree however. Outdoor greenery can be used in a number of ways to bring a natural seasonal accent to your home. Use greenery to cover a mantelpiece or as a centerpiece for your holiday table. Arrange it in garlands or swags for draping a door frame or banister. Cover pre-made forms to create indoor topiaries.

Your own yard is one of the best sources for accent greenery. Using cuttings from your own trees and shrubs provides fresher material than that of garden centers and may also give you a greater variety from which to choose.

Pines, firs, and cedars are all suitable choices for indoor decoration since they dry out slowly and can hold their needles longer in warm interior temperatures. Prune carefully when gathering your greenery and distribute cuts evenly to retain the plant’s natural form. Strip away lower leaves and crush or split woody stems. Stand the branches in water until ready to use.

Enhance your evergreen decorations by using other gifts from the outdoors. Holly, nandina, and pyracantha berries as well as rose hips provide color. Pine cones, seed pods, acorns, and sweet gum balls give textural interest to the arrangement. Bunches of herbs such as rosemary, bay leaves, and lavender lend fragrance.

The origins of the outdoor wreath also reach back in history. The ancient Romans hung wreaths to denote Victory and over time this circle became a symbol of eternal life and strength. In more modern times they became known as welcome rings and were usually comprised of ivy, holly, and pine cones. Nowadays fir or ivy wreaths are decorated in all manner of ways using such materials as herbs, berries, fruits, or decorative leaves such as rhododendron or magnolia.
So use your imagination and let nature’s bounty help you offset the winter doldrums and celebrate the holiday season.

**Garden Tasks for late December through mid-January**

- Plant trees, shrubs and fruit trees.
- Start winter pruning shade trees.
- Spray roses with lime sulfur this month to control diseases and insects.
- Save wood ash as a soil amendment. Sprinkle ash on bulb beds and garden plots.
- Cut boughs can be used to cover perennial and bulb bed for insulation.

Do you have a question for the Master Gardeners or a subject you would like to see addressed in this column? Send your questions to the Transylvania Times or e-mail us c/o manymoons@citcom.net