

Ask a Master Gardener
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Decorating Naturally for Christmas

Q: Can you give me ideas for decorating with natural materials for Christmas?

A: Decorating our homes for Christmas is one of the special ways we create memories of the holiday season. Search for and cut your own Christmas tree. We have several tree farms in Carroll County that are a source for this opportunity if you are that adventurous. Making Christmas tree ornaments is a great project for the family. I have many special ornaments that were given to me over the years as a teacher and I think of the student and say their name as I place each one on my Christmas tree. Typical live flowers used at Christmas are poinsettias. Amaryllis and paper whites bulbs can be forced to bloom and be enjoyed in your home during the holidays, then planted in your yard later. Each time you see them bloom you can remember the beauty they provided at Christmas.

In the southern United States the custom of decorating with fresh greenery, seasonal fruits, nuts and berries dates back to colonial times and was probably brought here by the colonists from England. I remember visiting Colonial Williamsburg and being amazed at the use of natural materials in decorating. Windows and doors were adorned with wreaths, garland and swags laden with apples, pineapple, and other seasonal fruits. Inside the homes were centerpieces of apples, lemons, oranges, pomegranates and greenery. Swags were hung over the doors and garlands were draped across the mantles. Candles were interspersed among the natural materials, creating a beautiful display. You could take a hint from Williamsburg and enjoy the naturalness of their decorations.

As you decorate for Christmas you may find natural treasures from your own yard. Using your own plant materials will add your personality to your decorations. As you begin to use natural materials from your yard, think of what plants you may want to add to your landscape in the future that will increase your supply of decorative materials in the years to come. Holly? Winterberry? Magnolia? Consider walking in your neighborhood, or travel to a beautiful wooded location to spend the afternoon enjoying quiet time while collecting seasonal items to use in your home. Be certain that it is permissible to take items from wherever you choose to look.

Among the types of greenery you may like to use are pines, firs and cedars. These work well because they last for weeks at a time. Holly, nandina, boxwood and magnolia also may be used both inside and out. Don't forget mistletoe, if you have someone who can reach it for you! You may wish to spray the live clippings with an anti-transpirant, which may be found at some hardware and garden centers, to help retain the moisture of the plant material. Naturally dried items such as pinecones, acorns, pecans, magnolia pods, sweet gum balls, dried okra pods, beautifully formed black gum twigs and dried hydrangea blooms can be used in many decorations and don't need to be sprayed, as they will keep for long periods of time.

You are actually pruning the shrubs and trees when you take cuttings, so try to cut with sharp pruning shears and make the cuts near a joint. Fill a bucket with water before going out and place live cuttings into it in order to help them last longer. Crush the stems of the woody plants so water will be absorbed. Store the cuttings out of sunlight and in a cool place until you are

ready to use them. When you bring materials or finished items inside, do not hang them in direct sunlight or near heat sources.

Remember children and pets as you use natural plant materials. Some popular berry producing plants can be toxic, namely mistletoe and holly. Keep them out of reach of inquisitive children and curious pets and clean up and discard any berries that may fall on the floor.

Use a wreath that you have on hand. Grapevine wreaths can be used from one season to the next by changing the adornments and colors. Add seasonal greenery or dried hydrangea flowers for texture. A striking wreath is made from pinecones and nuts which are wired to a wreath form. I saw a wreath at an arts show made of dried corn husks, that were folded, attached to picks and made to cover a styrofoam wreath form. A popular wreath is made from magnolia leaves which encircle the wreath in one direction. These are attractive in both natural green or sprayed gold.

Among my favorite Christmas decorations, and ones that I use each and every Christmas, are the fragrant wreaths, swags, garlands and potpourri made of fresh Fraser Fir by the Carroll County Master Gardeners. The wreath sale ends on December 6, so hurry, if you haven't already bought yours. Call the Ag Center to check out the availability at 770-836-8546.

My hope is that you can use some of these ideas, add your own personality and come up with some Christmas decorations that add to your joy this year.

For answers to any gardening questions, contact a Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, via e-mail at ccmg@uga.edu or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.