

# Decorating Naturally

Nebraska Statewide Arboretum

When the holiday season arrives I look forward to decorating our home and deck with wreaths, arrangements, evergreen boughs and tree decorations gathered from nature's harvest. For me, natural crafts make holiday decorating special, from gathering the berries and branches, to the personal touches I add to an arrangement. There is an impressive variety of natural materials available to add a special glow to the holidays. You can gather in the wild, get permission from a property owner, or you can plant a variety of plants in your own garden. Plan ahead and make your holiday designs unique using the following plant material gathered from nature.

**Evergreen Boughs.** I collect a variety of evergreen branches for holiday decorating, taking advantage of the different textures and various shades of green. Evergreen branches, gathered and bunched together, are fastened with wire to form a fan shape. These fans can be wired on a railing, fence or post, using the next fan to overlap and hide the wire and bare stems. One fan may contain a variety of evergreens, but I usually place the largest needled pines at the base and the finer textures on top. A good fan may have scotch or Austrian pine at the base, with eastern red cedar or juniper branches, blue spruce, concolor fir, Canada hemlock, Douglasfir or Japanese yew. For holiday decorating, evergreen boughs can be thought of as the "filler" in the arrangement. Pine cones can be added later for highlights.

**Jolly Holly.** The best evergreen holly to grow in Nebraska for holiday decorating is the meserve holly hybrid, blue princess. This holly, with its lustrous, dark green foliage and abundant dark red fruit, grows well here on the Plains. You will need to plant a 'Blue Prince' for every three or four 'Blue Princess' for fruit set. I use holly in indoor container arrangements where the stems are pushed into wet floral foam along with pine, spruce, dogwood stems or any plant that will need to be kept fresh. Remember to add water to the foam blocks every day to keep the materials fresh and your foliage will last for several weeks.

**Bark Brilliance.** Red-stemmed and yellow-stemmed dogwoods provide a nice vertical accent in evergreen arrangements or pine boughs. Try using the bright golden stems of willows or the rich purple-black stems of pussy willow. The peeling bark of river birch or white paper birch makes great wallpaper for ornaments, a stylish birdhouse, or for the nativity scene.

**A Very Berry Xmas.** Cut branches of fruiting shrubs, trees and vines make great holiday decorations. There is a plethora of good landscape plants to choose from but the following list is some dependable choices for wreaths, swags, mantel decorations or outdoor containers.

- Crabapples—The varieties 'Don Wyman', 'Harvest Gold', 'Cardinal Candy' are excellent for containers, slipped into boughs or frozen into ice luminaries.
- Viburnum—American cranberrybush, 'Wentworth' has bright red persistent clusters and linden viburnum has red winter fruit that looks like shriveled red raisins.
- Coralberry—Buckbrush, with its purplish-red fruit clustered on thin arching stems, lasts a long time in arrangements and is a favorite for wreaths and swags.
- Rose Hips—Rugosa and redleaf roses are some of the best for hip production.
- Osage-Orange- Cut the big green fruit in ½" slices and dry; spray paint gold and fasten with a hanger for the tree. Nice decorative seed patterns.
- Black Walnut—The nuts can be used for garland on the tree with other fruits and nuts.
- Bittersweet—Great combined with evergreens. Harvest clusters before the fruit opens.
- Bayberry—Semi-evergreen foliage has the same pleasant odor as bay candles when bruised. The waxy gray fruit clusters are a natural for almost any arrangement.
- Acorns, hawthorne, snowberry, sweetgum, hazelnuts, common alder, baldcypress cones, sumac heads, quince fruit, eastern wahoo, winterberry holly and cotoneaster can all add a special touch to any arrangement or decorative bowl.
- Make your own wreath backing using the long durable vines of wild grape, Virginia creeper or sweet autumn clematis.



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