

Holiday Decorations from Nature

As the holiday season approaches and the economy continues in “slow mode,” why not save some money, exercise your native creativity and use some of nature’s bounty growing close at hand to fashion your holiday decorations?

Everything from wreaths to garlands, arrangements and swags can be made naturally. Using what we have outdoors can be an especially-economical alternative to the artificial. Former and current UCCE Tuolumne County Master Gardeners offer some ideas to decorate your table and home with the abundant gifts of nature during this holiday season.



Consider a centerpiece or cornucopia of pumpkins, winter squashes, Native American corn, pine cones, acorns, nuts, grapes, pears, pomegranates, and apples. Short branches of greens, tucked among these items, can be used as filler. Hollowed out pumpkins can be used to hold flowers or candles.



Tie dinner napkins with raffia and tuck in a pretty fallen leaf (plentiful this time of year) and an acorn. Do you have access to grapevines or Virginia creeper? Twist into garlands or wreaths for table, mantelpiece, doorway, or stairs. Add leaves and berries if you like.

Our Mother Lode is blessed with evergreens in an astonishing array of green. Pine and cedar are probably the most common. You might also have access to holly, magnolia, boxwood, Nandina (Heavenly Bamboo), manzanita and toyon in your landscape. Try adding these greens, their natural berries, or small clusters of rosemary or lavender tied with ribbon to your wreaths or garlands for color.

An idea for keeping greens fresh and creating a seasonal “wreath” is to use a large potato as a base. Purchase the largest potato you can find. Drill through one end of the potato to insert a hanger of nylon fishing line or wire. Form a loop.

Gather a selection of perennial greens from around your garden. A variety of leaf sizes looks best, such as manzanita (several varieties), rosemary, boxwood, cotoneaster, juniper, and bush germander. Soft stems won't work; they must be firm and woody in order to stick into the potato. Trim your clippings to short pieces (about 6”) with sharp ends.



Using an ice pick, poke holes in the potato and, starting at the outside edge, insert short clippings to build a wreath. Continue to insert clippings, working from back to front, until potato is filled. Add a bow or seasonal ornament if you wish. Hang outside, on your front door, preferably in a shady location, and the wreath will stay fresh for a month or two. If some clippings begin to look droopy, replace them with fresh. This is also a great holiday gift for friends and family members.



Do you have access to pine cones? Use individual cones or wire a grouping together. Fresh sugar pine cones, especially, should be dried before use by placing them on aluminum foil in a 250 degree oven for two to three hours. This dries the sap, making them much easier to handle. Try adding these to swags decorated with wide ribbon.

Holiday garlands have traditionally been made by stringing popcorn or cranberries together. Another interesting garland can be made by stringing together bright red apples. The scent of apples is an added bonus. Use a heavy duty needle and fishing line to make it sturdy.

Be creative and use what you have at hand. The items you will need are as common as the bushes in your front yard or as simple as wild grasses, bare branches, clusters of berries, or even interesting weeds. For example, the bare, twisted red branches of native manzanitas create architecturally beautiful indoor decorations. Any natural material growing within reach is “fair game” to create holiday cheer in your home. Enjoy.



These holiday decorating ideas come to us from Nina Bynum, Master Gardener from 1996-2007, Joan Bergsund, Master Gardener from 1995-2010, and Kathy Nunes, currently certified Master Gardener.