

## **Natural Holiday Decorating**

By Nina Bynum and Joan Bergsund

Decorating for the holidays is a family tradition. 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? Master Gardeners always encourage the use of native plants. Native gardening is on the upswing, and so are natural decorations. Everything from wreaths to garlands, arrangements and swags can be made naturally. Here are some ideas to decorate your table and home with the abundant gifts of nature during this holiday season.

You might like to tie dinner napkins with raffia and tuck in a pretty fallen leaf and an acorn. Do you have access to grapevines? Twist them into garlands or wreaths for table, mantelpiece, doorway or stairs. Add leaves and berries as fillers.

Our Mother Lode area is blessed with evergreens that come in an astonishing array of the color green. Pine and cedar are probably the most common ones here. You might have holly, boxwood, or nandina in your landscape. Try adding these to your wreaths or garlands for color. The greenery you cut will last much longer if kept cool. Use fresh pieces outside as much as possible and inside closer the holiday. Plunge cuttings into water as you remove them.

Another clever idea for keeping your greens fresh and moist is to use a potato as a wreath "base." Purchase the largest potato you can find. Drill through one end of the potato to insert a hanger. Use nylons fishing line, wire - anything that won't rot from the moisture in the potato. Form a loop.

Gather a selection of perennial greens from around your garden. A variety of leaf sizes looks best. I use 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 inches) 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 the potato is filled. Add a bow or Christmas 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 a great gift for friends and neighbors.

Do you have access to sugar pine cones? I learned long ago that if they are fresh, they should be dried before use. I place them on aluminum foil in a 250 degree oven for two to three hours. This dries their sap and they become much easier to handle. Try adding these to swags decorated with wide red 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 holly bushes in your front yard, or as simple as wild grasses, bare branches or clusters of berries. I have an abundance of native manzanitas and like to use their bare, twisted red branches for decorating indoors. These materials are versatile, so use your imagination. Any natural material growing within reach is fair game to create holiday cheer in your home. Enjoy your natural decorations. HAPPY HOLIDAYS!

*Nina Bynum and Joan Bergsund are former University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners of Tuolumne County. This article was taken from the Master Gardener book, "Sharing the Knowledge," available for \$25 in the UCCE office at 52 N. Washington Street, Sonora, Ca. 95370 (phone 533-5696) and at The Mountain Bookstore at 13769 Mono Way, Sonora, CA (phone 532-6117).*