



Native Plants for Holiday Decorations

BY DONNA WILEY | AS PUBLISHED IN THE NEWS JOURNAL December, 2010

As the backbone of the garden, native evergreen plants are an important part of the winter landscape. They serve as a backdrop to other garden plants, provide screening and privacy, act as windbreaks, provide wildlife habitat, and much more. For generations people have also used evergreens to adorn their homes during the darkest days of winter and continue to do so, carrying on this tradition even today.

Did you know that many of the native evergreen shrubs and trees used to create traditional holiday decorations can be grown in Delaware? It's true; you need not travel any further than your own backyard to find the freshest boughs to "deck your halls"! Below are some ideas to make the most of what your garden has to offer and keep your decorations looking attractive for weeks.

Creating the Right Conditions

When gathering evergreens you should use sharp pruning shears to give a clean cut so the maximum amount of water can be absorbed by the cut portion of the stem. It may also be helpful to crush thick woody stems with a hammer.

Condition the evergreens by making a fresh cut and then submerging the end in a container of warm water, making sure to strip off foliage that will be below the water level—it will rot if you don't remove it. This "conditioning" re-hydrates the foliage and is particularly important if you buy greenery that has been sitting in a shop for an unknown period of time.

Cut branches of many evergreens are naturally resilient. Even so, there are things you can do to extend their beauty. Store them in a cool place above freezing and out of direct sun light such as an unheated garage; and always keep cut greens away from open flames. Providing a source of moisture will also help keep them fresh. This can be as simple as placing them in a container with water or wet florist foam; or devise more elaborate wire forms stuffed with moist sphagnum moss used for wreaths and topiaries.

In addition, individual pieces of greenery or finished arrangements can be sprayed with an anti-transpirant such as Wilt-Pruf® which coats the foliage to lock in moisture. You can find these products

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This exuberant arrangement brightens any place in the home with Winter Gold winterberry holly, Southern magnolia, pine foliage and cones, and Eastern red-cedar.



American holly, Ilex opaca



Florida-anise tree, Illicium floridanum

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in hardware stores, but be sure to follow the directions on the label to insure optimum effectiveness.

Evergreen Delight

In Delaware one of the most important holiday plants is **American holly** (*Ilex opaca*) with its bright red berries and evergreen foliage. American holly became an important part of the local economy when small cottage industries arose to make wreaths to sell in neighboring cities. In the early days of this cottage industry, decorations were not intended to last long. Today, we expect our decorations to last for weeks, so it is best to keep holly stems in water. Spraying with an anti-transpirant is also helpful but you may still have to replace a few stems to keep decorations looking fresh. Remember, holly berries are toxic so keep them away from children and pets.

White pine (*Pinus strobus*) is a large native tree commonly used in Delaware landscapes. It not only has fine-textured, blue-green needles but produces cones that can be used to embellish your decorations. The foliage makes a very durable component to holiday décor and is often wired into roping to hang indoors and outdoors. Use restraint, though, when applying anti-transpirant pines; it can cause the delicate needles to stick together.

Southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*) is a marvelous evergreen tree hardy in our region. Long lasting in and out of water, the elegant foliage of this magnolia is appropriate for decorations from fall through the New Year. The large, shiny, leaves are dark olive-green on the top and velvety brown on the bottom. Avoid spraying anti-transpirant on the undersides of the leaves because it will ruin the beautiful fuzzy texture. Use the bold leaves by themselves or with other greens to produce opulent decorations. In addition, the cone-like fruits of magnolia make interesting embellishments.

Holiday greenery does not necessarily have to be true green. The spikey foliage of Eastern red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) may have a grey or blue cast with a slight bronzing of the tips in the winter. Avoid spraying with anti-transpirant because it tends to darken the foliage. The branches have a wonderful cedar scent and produce an abundance of light blue berries.

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Mountain leucothoe, *Leucothoe fontanesiana*



Southern magnolia, *Magnolia grandiflora*



Large holiday arrangements such as this one take advantage of textures and colors of evergreens including Southern magnolia, white pine, American holly, Eastern red-cedar, Densa inkberry holly and red twig dogwood.

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While the holidays are all about tradition, don't be afraid to be adventurous and cut something different to spice up your holiday décor. **Mountain leucothoe** (*Leucothoe fontanesiana*) has arching branches of pointy leaves which often turn bronze-red in the winter, providing an interesting color contrast with other greenery. The small, deep-green leaves of **Densa inkberry holly** (*Ilex glabra* 'Densa') make a fine alternative to boxwood. Finally, for something truly different, try **Florida-anise tree** (*Illicium floridanum*), an under-appreciated shrub with aromatic foliage. This unusual greenery may need a little more care to remain fresh, so it is helpful to provide moisture to the stems after cutting to keep them looking their best.

Thinking Outside the Evergreen Box

While not evergreen, there are several plants that make excellent additions to holiday arrangements. For a strong vertical element, use the sumptuous **red twig dogwood** (*Cornus sericea*) or yellow stems of **yellow twig dogwood** (*Cornus sericea* 'Flaviramea').

For a truly spectacular berry display, **winterberry holly** (*Ilex verticillata*) can't be beaten. This deciduous shrub loses its leaves in the fall, exposing the bright berries which adorn stems of the leafless plants. While typically red-fruited, for something different try the golden-apricot fruit of Winter Gold **winterberry holly** (*Ilex verticillata* 'Winter Gold') especially in Thanksgiving or New Year's arrangements.

Be Creative

Now that you have gathered your plant material it is time to get creative. Use one type of greenery in your decorations for simple elegance or try combining foliage shapes and textures to create a more sophisticated design.

The sky is the limit when it comes to embellishing your decorations. I like using natural elements but am not adverse to applying paint and glitter to add some bling. An arrangement made out of native evergreens can last for weeks and the embellishments can be changed to suit any occasion.

This holiday season, let your garden inspire you to create beautiful decorations. Next spring when you plan your garden be sure to include some native evergreens which will not only look great throughout the year but will provide interesting material for all your holiday festivities.

From all the staff at Mt. Cuba Center who share their passion for native plants and gardening with you, have a wonderful holiday season.



The bounty of the garden is expressed in this arrangement that includes red twig dogwood, inkberry holly, winterberry holly, white pine, Eastern red-cedar, mountain leucothoe, and Florida Anise-tree.



This upright arrangement creates striking contrast using red twig dogwood, mountain leucothoe, Southern magnolia, and Eastern red-cedar as well as American holly white pine foliage and cones.

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About the Author

DONNA WILEY, HORTICULTURIST

Donna is the horticulturist in Mt. Cuba Center's Formal Gardens and has been at Mt. Cuba Center for 26 years. Donna's interests include container gardening and floral arranging.