

## Decorating for the Holidays

by Nina Bynum and Joan Bergsund

Decorating for the holidays is a family tradition. In this time of economic concern, 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 alternative to the artificial. Here are 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**? Twist them 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 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 to 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 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 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 family members.

Do you have access to **sugar pine cones**? If they're fresh, they should be dried before use by placing them on aluminum foil in a 250 degree oven for two to three

hours. This dries their sap, making them 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 manzanita and like to use their bare, twisted red branches for decorating indoors. **Any natural material growing within reach is “fair game”** to create holiday cheer in your home. Enjoy your natural decorations and Happy Holidays from UCCE Tuolumne County Master Gardeners.

*These holiday decorating ideas come to us from Nina Bynum, Master Gardener from 1996-2007, and Joan Bergsund, a currently-certified Tuolumne County Master Gardener.*