

Holiday Décor Courtesy of Mother Nature **by Kathy Nunes**

Although summer is my favorite time of year, I take great pleasure in decorating for Christmas. Whether you're celebrating a particular holiday or just the joy of winter, a few natural and simple decorations can create a festive tone. Those of us fortunate enough to live in the Mother Lode are blessed to be surrounded with a host of possibilities. Just think outside the (ornament) box!

Scan your yard, take a walk or go for a drive. There are so many easy to find (and free!) materials right in our midst. Be sure greenery is as fresh as possible since some won't be in water when displayed. Keep cuttings in water outside until you are ready to use them. Then spruce up your fireplace mantle, shelving, tables, chandeliers and even the tops of curtain rods. You can also tuck small loose pieces of greenery around candy dishes, villages, nativity scenes, your collections or tall candles. Just keep fire safety in mind!

Here are some examples of greenery that should be fairly easy to find (be sure to ask permission if on someone else's property):

- Small limbs from your (or your neighbors') redwood, cedar, fir, spruce or pine trees.
- Cuttings from shrubs such as holly and junipers.
- Branches removed from the lower portion of a freshly cut Christmas tree.
- Fresh tree trimmings left behind at Christmas tree lots – many folks gladly give them away.

There's no need to use wire or florist tape when decorating casually – just lay the pieces of greenery where they will be displayed. Overlap or loosely weave the pieces together – this makes it easy to customize the size. However, a hanging garland or a movable centerpiece must be wired together.

Creations displayed without water will last longer hanging outdoors where it's cooler. If you use them indoors, it's easy and quick to pull out some of the greens as they dry and insert a few fresh ones. Here are some ideas to get your creative juices flowing:

- Make a hanging swag by holding a straight branch in the air facing down. Wrap some wire around the top where it can be hidden by a bow. Then overlap the straight piece with smaller branches. Wire each one as you add it to create a teardrop shape.
- Bend the center bottom of a flexible wire coat hanger towards the top to create an upside down V or make a triangle and attach branches. The hanger hook makes it easy to hang the swag. Use small twigs to hide the hook or wrap ribbon around it, leaving long pieces of ribbon hanging down. Shape ribbon into a bow and attach it with wire in the center of the swag.
- Use a grapevine wreath or swag as a form (find them at garage sales or make your own). Insert cuttings and embellish to suit your taste. For a wreath, start at the top and tuck in the cuttings facing down – be sure to cover the inside and outside.
- Revive artificial garland or wreaths that have seen better days. Push in small fresh pieces of greenery or berries and add a few embellishments.

To create a longer-lasting centerpiece, use oasis—the green spongy foam used in professional floral arrangements. It's easily cut to size and absorbs water to keep flowers fresh. It's available in most craft stores and from some florists. Cut it into the desired shape of your centerpiece, soak it in water and put it on a flat plate or decorative container. Insert small stems of greenery, overlapping them until you like the overall look. Insert candle(s) in the center of the oasis.

To add a little zing, embellish your creation with:

- Filler greens such as holly, magnolia leaves, boxwood, manzanita or heavenly bamboo
- Berries from holly, pyracantha, cotoneaster, heavenly bamboo, junipers or Chinese pistache
- Individual pine cones or a grouping wired together
- Small birdhouses and artificial birds, nests, eggs or feathers
- Rosemary or lavender tied in small clusters with ribbon
- Decorative picks found at craft stores
- Ornaments or groupings of ornaments wired together (recycle!)
- Figurines – they don't have to be traditional Christmas forms
- Small white lights intertwined

You can add even more pizzazz by surrounding your flat-surface creations with colorful plants like poinsettias (real or silk), cyclamen, amaryllis or pansies. Use the natural gifts that Mother Nature gives us. Place a few things around the room, smell the green outdoors, sit back and enjoy the holidays!

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