

Holiday Decorating With Fresh Greenery

Decorating the house with fresh greenery is one of the oldest winter holiday traditions. Evergreens have been a part of winter festivals since ancient times. Evergreens are used to represent everlasting life and hope for the return of spring.



Barbara H. Smith, ©2016 HGIC, Clemson Extension

A traditional boxwood wreath is decorated with pomegranates and nandina berries.

Barbara H. Smith ©2016 HGIC, Clemson University

Southerners have been decorating with greenery since colonial days, although the custom was not common in the Northern United States until the 1800s. Churches were decorated elaborately with garlands of holly, ivy, mountain laurel and mistletoe hung from the roof, the walls, the pews, pulpit and sometimes the altar. Lavender, rose petals and herbs such as rosemary and bay were scattered for scent. Homes were decorated in a simpler fashion with greenery and boughs in the window frames and holly sprigs stuck to the glass with wax.

Today, decorating for the holidays with fresh greenery is more prevalent than ever. Greenery such as cedar, ivy, pine and holly add a fresh look and natural scent to our homes.

Gathering Greenery

The first and often the best place to look for holiday greenery may be in your own landscape. Greenery gathered from your own garden will be far fresher than any that you can buy. You may also have a variety of unusual greenery that would be difficult to find for purchase.

When gathering live greenery from your shrubs and trees, remember that you are actually pruning the plants. Consider carefully which branches to cut and which ones to leave. Distribute the cuts evenly around the plant in order to preserve its natural form.

Types of Greenery

Many different kinds of greenery can be used for holiday decorations. Pines, firs and cedars are good to use for indoor decoration since they dry out slowly and hold their needles best at warm interior temperatures. They may last for several weeks if properly treated and cared for. Hemlock, spruces and most broadleaf evergreens will last longer if used outdoors.

Below are some suggested varieties to use in holiday decorating.

Boxwood: This small-leaved shrub is a longtime favorite for fine-textured wreaths and garland. It has an aroma that is either loved or hated. Be sure of your reaction before using it indoors.



Barbara H. Smith, ©2016 HGIC, Clemson Extension

Boxwood wreaths are long lasting, and may be decorated with white nandina berries and gold mop cypress for interesting accents.

Barbara H. Smith ©2016 HGIC, Clemson University

Cedars: Deodar cedar has a wonderful fragrance. If small male cones are present, spray them with lacquer or acrylic to prevent the messy release of pollen at room temperature.

Firs: All firs have wonderful scent and good tolerance of hot, dry indoor conditions. The needles are short and flat with excellent color and needle retention. Fraser fir wreaths and swags are commonly available from commercial sources.



Barbara H. Smith, ©2016 HGIC, Clemson Extension

The addition of fresh fruit and dried flowers add interest to a fresh Fraser fir wreath.

Barbara H. Smith ©2016 HGIC, Clemson University



Barbara H. Smith, ©2016 HGIC, Clemson Extension

A table centerpiece made of Eastern red cedar, hemlock, nandina berries and apples.

Barbara H. Smith ©2016 HGIC, Clemson University

Holly: This most traditional holiday green comes in several forms, both green and variegated. Female plants display bright red berries. Make sure that holly does not freeze after cutting, or the leaves and berries may blacken.



Barbara H. Smith, ©2016 HGIC, Clemson Extension

A wreath made of holly, Fraser fir and gold mop cypress adds a traditional touch to an entry.

Barbara H. Smith ©2016 HGIC, Clemson University

Ivy: This vigorous vine is readily available in many yards. It makes an excellent green for holiday arrangements. The cut ends must be kept in water, or the ivy will quickly wilt.

Junipers: Fragrant, short, green or silver-blue foliage that may be adorned with small blue berries. The needles are often sticky. Eastern red cedar is a native juniper and is readily available.

Magnolia: The large leaves are a glossy, dark green that contrast well with the velvety, brown undersides. Magnolia leaves make stunning wreaths and bases for large decorations. The leaves hold up very well even without water.



Barbara H. Smith, ©2016 HGIC, Clemson Extension

Magnolia wreaths make beautiful wreaths and last well during the holidays.

Barbara H. Smith ©2016 HGIC, Clemson University

Mountain Laurel: This is a traditional evergreen in the South for wreaths and garlands. As with other broad-leaved evergreens, however, laurel holds up best when used outdoors.

Pine: There are many different types of pine to use in garlands and wreaths. Most are long lasting with excellent needle retention.

Southern Smilax: This evergreen vine has thick, glossy leaves and is nearly thornless. It is traditionally used in the South for holiday and wedding decorations.



Barbara H. Smith, ©2016 HGIC, Clemson Extension

Southern smilax has been traditionally used in the South for weddings and holiday decorations.

Barbara H. Smith ©2016 HGIC, Clemson University



Barbara H. Smith, ©2016 HGIC, Clemson Extension

A pine garland frames a doorway and has long-lasting needle retention.

Barbara H. Smith ©2016 HGIC, Clemson University

Spruce: Wreaths are the main use for spruce greens. The branches are stiff with short, sharp needles. Blue spruce is especially attractive because of its color, and it holds its needles better than other spruce. Needle retention is poorer on spruce than on other conifer greens.



Barbara H. Smith, ©2016 HGIC, Clemson Extension

Dried oranges and yarrow, okra and lotus pods, peacock feathers, and barley adorn a spruce wreath.

Barbara H. Smith ©2016 HGIC, Clemson University

Some other excellent evergreens that can be used for holiday greenery include:

- Arborvitae
- Cryptomeria
- Hemlock
- Gold Mop Cypress
- Leyland Cypress
- Ligustrum
- Nandina
- Pittosporum
- Podocarpus

Caution: Ground pine, also known as princess pine or creeping cedar (*Lycopodium* species), is often used for Christmas decorations. However, this native plant is very slow-growing and local populations can be destroyed after only a few years of harvesting for Christmas decorations.

Decorating Safely

Dried evergreens can become flammable when in contact with a heat source such as a candle flame. Make sure that any wreaths, roping and garlands that you bring indoors are as fresh as possible. Check needles by bending them. They should be flexible and not break. Avoid greenery that are shedding or that have brown, dry tips.



Barbara H. Smith, ©2016 HGIC, Clemson Extension

An apple makes a great base for a candle surrounded by boxwood, nandina berries and baby's breath.

Barbara H. Smith ©2016 HGIC, Clemson University

Before bringing the greenery inside, soak them in water overnight to rehydrate them. Commercial sprays are available that can be used to provide some fire resistance.

Never place fresh greenery near heat sources, such as space heaters, heater vents or sunny windows. Be careful of wreaths used on the front door, if there is a glass outer door that receives direct sunlight. Keep greenery away from candles and fireplaces. If you use lights near your green arrangements, make sure that they stay cool, and if outside, that they are rated for exterior use.

Check your decorations every couple of days for freshness. If greenery are becoming dry, either replace or remove the dry portions. Make sure to discard dry greenery away from the house or garage to prevent a further fire hazard.

Safety for Children & Pets

Some popular plants used in holiday decorating can present poisoning hazards for small children or pets. Poisonous berries are found on holly plants, yews,

mistletoe, ivy plants, Jerusalem cherry, bittersweet and crown of thorns. The pearly white berries of mistletoe are particularly toxic. Keep all these plants out of the reach of children and curious pets.

Keeping Greenery Fresh

- Use clean, sharp cutters to cut branches and immediately put cut ends into water until ready to use.
- Crush the ends of woody stems to allow the cutting to take in more water.
- Keep greenery out of sunlight.
- Immerse greenery in water overnight before arranging. This allows the cuttings to absorb the maximum amount of moisture.
- Allow the foliage to dry and then spray it with an anti-transpirant, such as Wilt-pruf, to help seal in moisture. Note: Do not use antitranspirants on juniper berries, cedar or blue spruce. The product can damage the wax coating that gives these plants their distinctive color.
- Keep completed wreaths, garlands and arrangements in a cool location until use.
- Display fresh greenery and fruits out of the sun and away from heat.
- Plan to replace greenery and fruits throughout the holiday season if they become less than fresh.

Decorating With Greens

Many different types of decorations can be made with fresh greenery. Some traditional types are garlands, swags and wreaths. A number of different types of forms can be stuffed with sprigs or branches to create topiaries. A variety of wreaths and garlands are readily available commercially. Most are plain and unadorned, but can be dressed up with contrasting live greenery from the yard for a personal look.

In addition to the more commonly used evergreens, consider using other plant parts such as berries, dried flowers, cones and seed pods to give color and texture interest. Some possibilities include:

- Acorns
- Cotton bolls



Barbara H. Smith, ©2016 HGIC, Clemson Extension
Cotton bolls and pine cones add a nice Southern touch to a Fraser fir wreath.

Barbara H. Smith ©2016 HGIC, Clemson University

- Fruits such as lemons, limes, apples, pears, pomegranates, kumquats and pineapple.



Barbara H. Smith, ©2016 HGIC, Clemson Extension
Fresh apples, nandina berries, and pine make a stunning arrangement around the entrance.

Barbara H. Smith ©2016 HGIC, Clemson University

- Holly berries
- Hydrangea blossoms
- Lotus seed pods
- Magnolia pods
- Mistletoe
- Nandina berries
- Okra pods
- Pecans
- Pine cones
- Pyracantha
- Reindeer moss
- Rose hips
- Sweet gum balls
- Wax myrtle berries

Preserved flowers and leaves are useful and long-lasting as holiday decorations. Instructions for preserving flowers and leaves with glycerin are found in [HGIC 1151 Drying Flowers](#).



Barbara H. Smith, ©2016 HGIC, Clemson Extension

Dried flowers such as lavender, cock's comb, baby's breath, and gomphrena, brighten up an evergreen wreath made of pine and boxwood.

Barbara H. Smith ©2016 HGIC, Clemson University

How to Make a Kissing Ball

Kissing balls are often made of short sprigs of boxwood or other greenery and hung as an alternative to the traditional mistletoe sprig. The easiest way to construct a kissing ball is to use a round potato or Styrofoam ball for the base. The moisture in the potato will help keep the cut greenery fresh. Soak greenery to be used in water overnight. Insert evenly sized sprigs of the selected green into the potato or Styrofoam ball until it is completely covered. If you have difficulty inserting the sprigs, make a starter hole for each with a metal skewer.

Make the evergreen sprays form an even, well-rounded ball. After the ball is completed, decorate it with ribbons, berries, mistletoe or whatever else you wish. Then fasten a long piece of wire or ribbon to the ball so it can be hung from a chandelier, doorway, or window.



Barbara H. Smith, ©2016 HGIC, Clemson Extension

A boxwood kissing ball is an unusual alternative to the usual mistletoe sprig.

Barbara H. Smith ©2016 HGIC, Clemson University

Revised by Barbara H. Smith, HGIC Horticulture Extension Agent, Clemson University, 01/16. Originally prepared by Karen Russ, HGIC Horticulture Specialist; George D. Kessler, Extension Forester; and Bob Polomski Extension Consumer Horticulturist, Clemson University. New 11/99. Images added 01/16.

This information is supplied with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement of brand names or registered trademarks by the Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service is implied, nor is any discrimination intended by the exclusion of products or manufacturers not named. All recommendations are for South Carolina conditions and may not apply to other areas. Use pesticides only according to the directions on the label. All recommendations for pesticide use are for South Carolina only and were legal at the time of publication, but the status of registration and use patterns are subject to change by action of state and federal regulatory agencies. Follow all directions, precautions and restrictions that are listed.