

BRING NATURE INSIDE

Maritta Perry Grau, Frederick County Master Gardener

You may think that since your annuals and perennials are shriveled, dry, or nonexistent with the beginning of winter, you have to rely on hothouse flowers or artificial ones to keep nature inside with you.

Not so.

As the snows pile up (well, as I write, the weather prognosticators are promising at least a couple of deep snows), you can be snug and warm, surrounded by lovely greens and other natural materials in your home.

Don't throw out those dried arrangements you made for fall—just change out orange and brown accents for reds, greens, gold, silver and add some live greens. Junipers and yews can be lovely, as they so often have little berries (blue, juniper; red, yews) that add interest (but keep the poisonous berries away from pets). Jan Magill, a fellow master gardener who often presents seminars on holiday greenery at this time of year, suggests that you use bare branches, dried flowers, pods, and even bark to produce a natural effect in your holiday arrangements.

You'll be amazed at the wealth of decorative possibilities when you poke around in your garden. I've brought in dogwood branches, some bare, some with berries; upright stiff, brown Ostrich fern fronds; grapevines for wreaths; grasses; even weeds—all for winter decorations.

Matt Ory and Steven Jeweler, owners of Ory Custom Floral Design in New Market, recommend either bold or feathery greens, trimming them to fit the shape and size you want, whether a traditional high or low pyramid, something horizontal, or a more contemporary or Asian design.

Matt often adds 10 or more OLD pennies (he says they have more copper than the newer ones) to a vase of fresh greens. He usually makes the tallest plant, whether dried or fresh, two times the height of the vase. Remember though, if the arrangement is going to be on a dining room table, it should be low enough that it doesn't interrupt the sight line or conversation of people sitting across from one another.

Junipers and arborvitae tend to have curving, sometimes spreading branches, while yews and hollies have stiffer, more upright configurations. Magnolias and rhododendrons can add a broad, bold touch to your arrangement. You could also add bare branches or those with berries. If you're into glitz, spray paint branches with gold, silver, or white; add a few ornaments, and weave tinsel, ribbon, or tiny fairy lights among the branches. Spritz a little spray "snow" here and there.

But even unadorned evergreens and bare branches are beautiful. Curly branches, available in craft stores if not in your back yard, can be used for decorations, too. Weight them in a vase filled with stones, marbles, or other material, and hang a collection of ornaments from the branches. Some years, I hang nothing but birds on the branches; other years, it might be Santas, snowmen, or polar

bears. If you make a Christmas village on the mantel or under your tree, put twigs, small branches, or greens in Styrofoam squares and secure them in place with rubber cement or spackling paste. We've even used bits of coral from summer beach vacations as trees in our Christmas villages.

And don't stop with the greenery you're adding to your own surroundings. Consider using greenery or dried materials as gifts for friends and family during the upcoming holidays. (1) Fill a large seashell (or several smaller ones) with a well-drained potting mixture, then add some succulents appropriate for growing indoors, a small ornament or two, and a few sprigs of evergreen. (2) Create dried/green arrangements in odd-shaped jars, spray-painted cans, or other unusual containers. Add those bits of glitz and/or fairy lights for some sparkle. (3) Tie or hot glue greenery decorated with gilded or natural acorns or tiny pinecones (such as those from hemlocks) onto Hanukkah or Christmas presents.



Samples of natural materials to use in a winter arrangement. Some pieces have been sprayed with gold paint. From left: pinecone; fall plume from ribbon grass; magnolia seed pod; onion family flower heads; Russian sage; seed spore fronds from Ostrich fern; arborvitae branch (below Ostrich fronds); and rosemary. (courtesy photo, Maritta Grau)



Brownwreath-white bird

Small branches have been bent and tied together to form a wreath. Near the top, a small white bird perches, while a sparkly ribbon draws attention to the mix of dried materials and artificial fruits at the bottom. (courtesy photo, Jan Magill)



Squarewreath

For a more contemporary look, loosely bundle small branches into a square; paint them white, and add red berries, a spring or two of evergreen, and a bow dotted with the colors of the season. (courtesy photo, Jan Magill)

Bring nature inside!

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