Using Fresh Greenery for the Holiday Season

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Thanksgiving has come and gone, the pumpkins and corn stalks are giving way to holly and pine cones and it is time to enjoy the seasonal decorations that we all enjoy at this time of year. The deep greens and reds of many traditional adornments really perk up the dull greys and browns of the late fall landscape. Many evergreen plants are the main contributors to our decorations and have long been a part of humans attempts to bring life into their homes as the shortened daylight of the winter solstice approaches.

Evergreen boughs from balsam and other firs, pine, spruce, and juniper will bring fragrance as well as beauty into a home. It can be as simple as placing cut boughs into a container or vase filled with water or as elaborate as creating roping or garland to adorn a staircase or fireplace mantel. Fresh greens that are not in water will benefit from a daily misting to keep them fresh-looking. Some species, such as Eastern juniper, *Juniperus virginiana*, will do better as outdoor decoration as their needles will dry out quickly and become brittle indoors. Western juniper, *Juniperus occidentalis*, works well both inside and out but may be harder to locate in Connecticut as it is native to the western United States.

Species that are more likely to dry out when subjected to the heat in a home should be used in outdoor swags and wreaths. All greens will benefit from a good overnight soaking in water before being used for decorating. If greens are not freshly cut then make a new clean, diagonal cut on the stem or branch before placing it into water. Another option is to use a commercially available anti-desiccant to provide a protective coating, spraying the leaves or needles until they are soaking wet and dripping. Allow the greens to dry thoroughly before decorating with them.

Image by Susan Pelton
For a change of pace when choosing greenery for a wreath or garland consider using rosemary or eucalyptus. Not only do their leaves lend a different appearance from the everyday fir or pine branches, but if they are placed on a door that is used frequently then their lovely scents can be appreciated each time you walk past. Rosemary, *Salvia rosmarinus*, a perennial woody herb, is well-suited to topiary designs that can be decorated or covered with strands of battery-operated tiny lights, brightening corners and nooks where a larger tree may not fit. Silver dollar eucalyptus, *Eucalyptus polyanthamos*, has lovely silver-green leaves that provide visual as well as aromatic interest. Eucalyptus oil is highly flammable so do not use its greenery with lights or near open flames. In fact, once any live greens begin to dry out and drop their leaves or needles, they should be disposed of.

Mistletoe, with its white berries, and holly, with its bright red berries, are true symbols of the season. The European mistletoe, *Viscum album*, was also borrowed from the Roman feast of Saturnalia where it was hung over a doorway to bring peace and love to the home. By the late 18th century the custom of kissing under the mistletoe was well-established. English, or common, holly, *Ilex aquifolium*, was long associated with the Roman festival Saturnalia and then later with Christmas as Christians adopted many of the pagan customs associated with late December.

A less prickly alternative to English holly is boxwood, *Buxus sp*. Boxwood may last for several weeks if it is treated properly: keep it out of direct sunlight, water it daily, put arrangements outside at night if possible, or use boxwood that has been preserved in a glycerin and dye solution. Preserved boxwood may last 3-5 years but keep it protected from the weather if it is outside. All greens will suffer if they are can continue to add will quickly dry out all plant material.

Image of mixed greens including boxwood and juniper by Susan Pelton.

After the holidays are over you can still make use of decorative greenery. With minimal care a rosemary topiary will last long into the new year. Keep it near a bright, cool window and water it when the surface of the soil is dry. Plant material that has not been treated with a desiccant or glycerin and dye can be composted or piled outside near a birdfeeder to provide shelter for birds or small animals.

For information on evergreen plants or for answers to your gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.