



Plant Evergreens for Holiday Decorating

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With the holiday season upon us, many choose to decorate their homes, both inside and out, with fresh cut greens. This year why not try your hand at creating an evergreen swag, tabletop arrangement, wreath, or filling your window boxes with fresh cut greens from your yard or surrounding areas (with permission, of course). Making holiday decorations can be simple, satisfying, and a great way to spend some time outdoors and maybe, do some much needed pruning. Over the years, I have planted a good number of broad and needle-leaved evergreens both for their landscape value and as fodder for holiday decorating.

You may wonder how this custom of cutting and displaying evergreen branches came to be. Bringing in branches of evergreens during the short, dark days of December was practiced in pre-Christian days by inhabitants of northern European countries. This was done to ward off evil spirits. Trees that held their needles throughout the cold winters symbolized the earth's fertility and eternal life. They served as a reminder that the earth would become green again.

Evergreens are pretty much a staple in foundation plantings. You may even have an evergreen hedge, mixed shrub border, or a few specimen shrubs or trees. Of course, if you want to have greens for the holidays it makes sense to wait until December before pruning them. While this may not be the optimal time of year, my plants seem to do quite well if a few branches are judiciously removed for decorative purposes. The majority of the pruning; however, is done in summer after new growth is fully expanded.

Whether planning a new planting, renovating an old one, or deciding on a shade tree or specimen shrub, consider varieties suitable for holiday use. If it is scent you are after, balsam fir is hard to beat but most evergreens emit a fresh, woody aroma. Balsam fir will grow into a good sized tree unless you decide to use it for your Christmas tree. Fraser and white firs are also excellent candidates for a tree or greens.

Almost any species of pine is suitable for decorative use especially if you choose the young growth. Hemlock is very attractive but loses its needles quite rapidly if placed in

warm temperatures. Spruces are lovely but prickly to work with. A recent speaker at our garden club suggested that putting on a pair of those disposable gloves will enable you to handle the spruce without getting stuck by the needles. A good number of yards are homes to yews, junipers and arborvitae. Some varieties are better for decorative purposes than others. Leave the ground-hugging junipers alone though.

For gold tipped foliage, quite attractive indoors or out, consider adding a false-cypress (*Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Filifera) or related plant to the landscape next year. These fine-textured plants can get somewhat open with age attaining a height of 4 to 20 feet.

Use other evergreen plants in mixed arrangements. Look for wayward branches of boxwoods, hollies, andromeda, mountain laurel, euonymus (especially the variegated types) and evergreen azaleas. Staghorn sumac berries, rosehips (not from multiflora roses) and winterberry fruits as well as pinecones and other seed pods can be used to accent your decorations.

When cutting for decorations, choose well formed branches with thick foliage. For small indoor arrangements, one might want to rinse the branches to remove dirt and insects. Stems can be recut and placed in water for several hours before arranging to keep them fresh. When creating outdoor swags, window boxes or other containers, generally these steps are skipped and the freshly cut greens are just used as needed.

A swag is probably the easiest and simplest of holiday decorations. It is basically a grouping of evergreen branches tied together in a pleasing manner. Branches can simply be wired together but beginners might benefit from using a wire coat hanger stretched vertically so that the hook can be used as a hanger.

For a swag, cut at least 3 pieces of greenery 18 to 24 inches long and 6 to 12 shorter pieces. Attach the 3 longer pieces to the coat hanger with the longest branch forming the center. The shorter branches can be wired on each side to increase the fullness of the swag. Fill in as needed with more branches of greenery and finish with a bow, a few sprigs of holly, cones or ornaments using thin green florist wire to attach.

Be adventurous and make a holiday swag or other arrangement this year. Perhaps your evergreen decorations, inside or out will become a family tradition. The quantity of evergreen material right in your own yard may surprise you. Just remember to prune wisely and add another evergreen or two each year for fuller and more varied arrangements.

For information on selecting and growing evergreens or on other gardening topics, 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 or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.





