

HOLIDAY FLORAL ARRANGEMENTS

11/01/2024

Ask a Master Gardener

Timely insights on relevant topics from our area's home gardening experts



Photo © Skagit County WSU Extension Master Gardeners

Creating Floral Arrangements Using Foraged Materials

Even though the flowers of summer have faded, it doesn't mean an end to beautiful arrangements

By: Karen Bruce, Skagit County WSU Extension Master Gardener

It is now officially fall; the weather has changed, and the flowers we have enjoyed all summer have faded away. But this does not have to signal the end of the beautiful arrangements you can create for your home – especially as we anticipate hosting events during the holidays or making hostess gifts! Bring joy to a shut-in, a busy mother, or someone recovering from an illness by bringing an arrangement made from materials in your garden.

One of my favorite things to do this time of year is to take garden walks, looking for interesting greenery and berries to use in floral arrangements during November and December. I live on a property bordered by a wooded area, which provides an opportunity to forage for some beautiful and interesting evergreens, branches, and berries. Many of us carry pruners in the back of the car and are known to forage along the side of the road, collecting interesting materials for arrangements.



Left: Blooming in late summer through the fall, Abelia adds softer pink and white tones to an arrangement. © Ginny Bode. **Center:** The bright leaves and soft bloom buds of Viburnum add interesting texture to floral arrangements © Ginny Bode/Skagit County WSU Extension Master Gardener. **Right:** Vibrant rosehips add a pop of color and texture that perfectly complements the evergreen bouquets. © Adobe Stock.

Collecting Greenery, Evergreens, and Flowers

These are some of the evergreen shrubs in the garden that can be used for greenery in your arrangements:

- Salal (*Gaultheria shallon*)
- Evergreen Huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*)
- Abelia
- Nandina (*Nandina domestica*)
- *Magnolia grandiflora*
- Rhododendron
- *Pieris japonica* – both greenery and flower
- Goshiki Osmanthus (*Osmanthus heterophyllus*)
- Eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus cinerea*)
- Dusty Miller (*Senecio cineraria*)
- Viburnum ‘Spring Bouquet’
‘Davidii’ (*Viburnum tinus* ‘Spring Bouquet’)
- Skimmia (*Skimmia japonica*)



Karen Bruce demonstrating how to make a holiday floral arrangement.

Evergreen Conifers (look for different textures and colors)

- Fir
 - Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*)
 - Grand Fir (*Abies grandis*)
 - White Fir (*Abies concolor*)
 - Noble Fir (*Abies procera*)
- Western Redcedar (*Thuja plicata*)
- Mountain Hemlock (*Tsuga mertensiana*)
- Pine (*Pinus*)
- Western Juniper (*Juniperus occidentalis*)
- Arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis*)

Berries/Pods/Seeds/Herbs

- Holly Berries (*Ilex*)
- Beauty Berry (*Callicarpa*)
- Rosemary (*Salvia Rosmarinus*)
- Winterberry (*Ilex verticulata*)
- Rosehips
- Poppy Seed Pods (can be spray painted gold, red, or silver)
- Pine Cones (can be hot glued to a bamboo stick)

Branches

- Curly Willow (*Salix alba tortuosa*)
- Red Twig and Yellow Twig Dogwood (*Cornus*) – Red Osier Dogwood
- White Birch
- Branches with Lichen

Flowers

- Camellia
- Hellebore
- Viburnum ‘Dawn’
- Sarcococca
- Daphne
- Pieris japonica
- Possibly Chrysanthemums if we haven’t had a hard frost



Left: Evergreens provide structure and rich deep hues to holiday arrangements. **Right:** Even as fall turns to winter, it is amazing how much the garden continues to offer for making floral arrangements. Photos © Karen Bruce/Skagit County WSU Extension Master Gardeners.

Tips for Harvesting

If you are not harvesting from your property, be sure to get permission from the property owner before you start cutting. Sometimes, you can visit a local nursery and get leftover branches from their Christmas tree cuttings.

For evergreen conifers, you can start harvesting as early as October and continue through the holidays. Only use trees larger than 6 feet and cut boughs 2-4 feet from the tip of a branch. Use proper pruning techniques, such as making a cut above a node in a branch. Do not cut more than 25% from your tree or shrub to prevent stress on the harvested plant. A good time to harvest is after a windstorm – you may be able to harvest branches that have fallen to the ground. This is also a good time to collect pine cones. Store your boughs outside or in a location such as a garage that will remain cool.

Pinecones and other conifer cones are fun because they come in many different shapes and sizes. If the cones you collect are closed, they will open up when baked on a cookie sheet at 250° F for one hour. Cones can be used as an accent laying on the bottom of your arrangement, or you can get bamboo skewers, drill a hole in the center of the cone, and use a hot glue gun to attach the bamboo skewer to the cone.

Check out the woods near your home for native holly berries that provide traditional red berries for the holidays. Also, you should be able to find white snowberries and, if you are fortunate, maybe some red winterberry. The false holly, ‘Goshiki,’ has a beautiful variegated leaf.

When harvesting greenery and flowers, have a container ready with several inches of lukewarm water. Let your cuttings rest in the container for at least an hour before you start creating your arrangement. Remember to remove any leaves or flowers from the bottom of the stem so that your water remains clean and no bacteria forms. I usually add a couple of teaspoons of preservative (the little white powder packets you get when you buy a bunch of flowers).

If you don't have preservative powder, you can make your own natural preservative using one of these three recipes. With each recipe, stir to dissolve and let cool before use.

1. Combine 2 cups lemon-lime carbonated beverage (Sprite or 7-Up), ½ teaspoon chlorine bleach, and 2 cups warm water.
2. Combine 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice, 1 tablespoon sugar, ½ teaspoon chlorine bleach, and 1 quart warm water.
3. Combine 2 tablespoons white vinegar, 2 tablespoons sugar, ½ teaspoon chlorine bleach, and 1 quart warm water.

Gather Your Supplies

In addition to branches, greenery, berries, and flowers, you will need:

- A container to hold your arrangement
- Floral foam, chicken wire, or another implement to hold the branches intact
- Floral clippers (may need two sizes – a larger one to cut conifer branches)
- Water with floral preservative added
- Greens, evergreens, berries, twigs, cones, and flowers
- Other decorations as desired, such as ribbons, ornaments, candles

When choosing a container, think about how you will be using the arrangement. If it is a table arrangement, keep the total height less than 10-12 inches tall, as you will want to be able to see and talk with your guests. Will it be viewed from one side or all sides? If it is a gift, be sure to use a vase or container that you don't care if it isn't returned.

Lay out all your supplies on a table and be sure to have a tarp or sheet underneath or work in an area such as a heated garage or shop. Keep a garbage can handy for extra stems and cuttings for composting later.



Let's Create a Beautiful Holiday Arrangement

- After you have chosen a container, decide how you are going to keep the flowers in place. Use a tape grid, floral foam, chicken wire (fold into a globe shape), or a floral frog. If you are using floral foam, be sure to soak it for several hours before you start arranging.
- Add a preservative water mix to the container, filling to about half full.
- A lazy Susan turntable helps view an arrangement from all sides
- Start adding greenery and building a foundation. Pine or cedar is good for hanging over the edges. Remember to strip the leaves/needles so they are not in the water causing bacteria growth.
- Add twigs or branches, such as the red twig dogwood, the white birch, and the lichen-covered branches.
- Add in odd numbers – 1, 3, 5.
- Add layers of greenery and define the shape using different colors and textures from the outside, working your way to the center.
- If you have a focal point such as a special ornament, a candle, or a lantern, add this now.
- Add berries and flowers if you like.
 - If you purchase flowers, buy ones that will last, such as chrysanthemums, alstroemerias, and carnations.
 - The greenery and branches will last for several weeks if watered and misted. Keeping the greenery, you can replace the flowers as needed.

- If you want to purchase specialty items to add to your arrangement, try little ornaments, cinnamon sticks wrapped with raffia, a bow, or little birds.

Care After You Have Completed Your Arrangement

Remember to keep the branches and flowers nourished by adding water every couple of days. Misting with water every few days is also helpful. Branches should stay looking good for several weeks. Replace flowers and greenery if they start fading.

Creating floral arrangements with foraged natural materials is a rewarding way to bring seasonal cheer into your home. Using these techniques, you can craft beautiful arrangements that brighten the holidays and bring joy to those around you.

REFERENCES (AND ADDITIONAL READING):

- Alicia Christiansen (October 2019) *Harvesting evergreen boughs from your woodland*. Oregon State University Extension. Retrieved from: <https://extension.oregonstate.edu/forests/christmas-trees/harvesting-evergreen-boughs-your-woodland>
- Buttolph, L., and Jones, E. (Nov. 2012) *Evergreen Boughs: A Brief Introduction to Harvesting and Marketing from Small Private Forestlands in the Pacific Northwest*. Income Opportunities for Small Woodland Owners: Fact Sheet Series No. 4, November 2012. Retrieved from: https://knowyourforest.org/sites/default/files/documents/Evergreen_boughs.pdf.



Karen Bruce

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Karen Bruce has been a Skagit County WSU Extension Master Gardener since 2019. She is co-manager of the Cottage Garden at the Discovery Garden on SR 536, west of Mount Vernon.