

**AT YOUR SERVICE**

**December 12, 2011**

### **Sprucing up Your Home with Holiday Greens**

By Jackie Bower, Master Gardener  
University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension, Hillsborough County

Decorating our homes with greenery for the winter holidays is a ritual that dates back many centuries. Among the greens that are important this season we find evergreens, like balsam, spruce and fir, as well as holly, mistletoe, ivy, laurel and rosemary. All have great significance attached to them and most of it predates Christianity. For thousands of years, evergreens have represented signs of hope and life. Not only do they remain green when everything else in nature appears dead, some of the plants actually bear fruit.

For truly fresh greens, plan to gather your own. Hard to tell how long ago those “fresh greens” at your local market were actually harvested. Here’s what to look for when buying if you just can’t get to the woods. Gently bend the needles or leaves on the greens you’re considering. It’s a very good sign if they’re pliable. If they’re brittle, find another source. Same goes for your Christmas tree. Grab a branch and carefully pull your hand to the end. You know the answer if you end up with a handful of needles!

Now is a good time to prune some of your needle-leaf trees and shrubs, but do take care. Pines, firs, spruces, cedars and hemlocks should be shaped carefully because they do not form buds on old wood. Yews, on the other hand, may be pruned as hard as you wish. Check out the fact sheet “Pruning Evergreens in the Landscape,” available online from [extension.unh.edu](http://extension.unh.edu), if you’re anxious about cutting into your shrubs.

Broad-leaf evergreens, like rhododendron, mountain laurel and andromeda, must be pruned carefully. At this time of year, you may actually be sacrificing future blooms. Buds for next spring were set last season. Better take out just the badly placed branches now if you were looking forward to flowers after this winter.

Hardy evergreens used outdoors will look fresh for quite a long time but you need to keep an eye on the decorations inside. Three weeks may be fine for safety and good looks with some greens: it may be as little as a week for others. Balsam, for example, has a very holiday smell, which makes it popular for indoor decorating. Unfortunately balsam dries out fairly quickly so your decorations may need to be replaced. Make up several swags at once and leave the extras outside; each week simply haul out the old and bring in the new.

Add some color and texture to your holiday decorations with red-twig dogwood and berries like euonymus, rose hips and winterberries--a good trimming now will encourage growth in the spring. (Note that you may not want to encourage bittersweet. Look around your neighborhood for other items of interest, like seedpods from Japanese Iris and milkweed, or cinnamon ferns. Pine cones and acorns may also be desirable.

Consider carefully where you're placing your greens indoors. Keep them away from heat sources and out of direct sunlight. If you normally keep the humidity high and the temperature low, your greens will last a lot longer than if your house is hot and dry. Any decorations with berries should be kept well out of reach of pets and small children. The berries of mistletoe, holly, bittersweet and yew are all poisonous.

Another popular holiday evergreen is bayberry. It is, in fact, not used for its decorative leaves but you surely recognize the smell. The leaves dry out and turn yellow much too quickly to be of much use in decorating although their scent is a nice addition to potpourri. The branches, with their clusters of grayish-white berries, may be used to supplement dried flower arrangements, wreaths, and other holiday decorations. Unlike other winter berries that fall easily from their stems, bayberries will cling fast to their branches for quite a long time. If you're thinking that you'd like to add bayberry in your landscaping next spring, keep in mind that the plant is similar to holly, you need a male and a female plant to get those waxy, aromatic berries.

Speaking of holly—we'd be remiss to not mention this world-famous symbol of the season. Unfortunately, once cut from the plant, holly is short-lived, both inside and out. For decorating in the house, perhaps you can find a way to keep the holly in a vase of water, otherwise the leaves dry out quickly. Outdoors, the leaves and berries on cut branches may turn black if they freeze. It's interesting to note that holly is said to bring bad luck if the decorations are left in the house after Twelfth Night, although holly brought from the church is supposed to bring good luck.

Many superstitions involve holiday greens. Apparently Romans exchanged evergreens with their friends as a sign of good luck, and various European cultures hung greens on their doors or in doorways. Some folks believed it would ward off evil spirits while others thought evergreens welcomed good ones. It's easy to see how these practices have evolved into the holiday wreaths and garlands that adorn our own doors and buildings.

Consider, too, the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe, another holiday green. Did you know that each time a couple kisses under mistletoe a berry should be removed? When the last berry is taken, there should be no more kissing. The reverence for mistletoe seems to have evolved many centuries ago when it was noted that the plant grew without touching the ground. We, of course, know it's a parasitic plant and survives thanks to the efforts of a host. In fact, it's delivered to the host plant through bird droppings. Hmmm! However, enemies of old were brought together under mistletoe and, in a way, given the opportunity to kiss and make up.

We've been sprucing up the house with greens all these years because they smell nice, or look pretty, or because it's tradition. But now we know it may also have given us a little extra luck!