

Floral Décor for the Holidays

By Claire Pavlik Purgus

Published in *SOCO Magazine*, November 2006

I wouldn't have thought so, but artichokes, grapes, lady-finger apples, cranberries, kale, and Swiss chard make fascinating additions to autumn and winter holiday floral centerpieces and wreaths, providing rich texture, color, and form to the traditional back-drop of winter greens, holly, and ivy. Other fruit, vegetables, and herbs that may be used fresh or dried in floral arrangements are pomegranates, okra pods, pink and red pepperberries, ornamental chili peppers, nuts, gourds, Indian corn, spearmint, oregano, and garlic.

With nature as benevolent guide down the well-worn path of floral art, we are limited only by our imagination – and perhaps time – as we prepare our homes and gardens for the winter holidays. This is where the florist enters center stage wearing a laurel wreath. While there's much we can do on our own to brighten our homes with floral art, florists are professionals – and their services are broad and variegated!

I asked a few SouthCoast florists what we should be doing now to prepare our homes and gardens for the upcoming holidays.

"Now's the time," says Ana Rothenbuhler of Snapdragons in Fall River and Bristol, "before the soil freezes, to clean out the window boxes and put in fresh cut boughs of winter greens and sticks or twigs for added structure. Arrange them in proportion to the window box. Add garden-inspired decorations," she suggests, "such as faux berries, weather-resistant ribbons, and pinecones."

While autumn is still in the air, take a walk through the yard or garden with a pair of clippers and a critical eye for floral fodder. Evergreen boughs make excellent garlands and wreaths and when used inside have the added bonus of emitting a pungent perfume. Herbs, ornamental grasses, and hydrangeas are easy to dry and are just a few plants that make wonderful floral material.

"Don't forget the containers," advises Roanne Robbins of Nature Contained in Tiverton Four Corners, who, several times a year, dresses containers for 75 clients. "Stone, concrete, and zinc containers may be used throughout the year without fear of damage from frost and may be planted, for example, with small dwarf conifers and dressed for the season with garlands and bows and then planted out in the garden in spring."

Large containers with imposing plantings certainly demand attention and awe but Roanne also has small containers nestled in between the ivy and moss. They're planted with miniature evergreens and alpiners: heath and heather, and several varieties of dwarf false cypresses such as hinoki (*Chameacyparis obtusa*) and sawara (*C. pisifera*), both native of Japan.

Autumn and Thanksgiving bring to mind traditional colors associated with harvest – deep golden yellows, russets, and orange. Teamed with greens, deep burgundy, and purple foliage such as purple fountain grass and purple ruffles basil, these colors make a splendid splash.

Chrysanthemums are a popular fall flower bursting with brilliant color – once Labor Day is done they spontaneously erupt in mounds of plushy color, providing instant gratification for color-thirsty eyes. Thanksgiving Day and autumnal floral arrangements may contain bittersweet, gourds and pumpkins – both large and small – dried Japanese lantern pods, Indian corn, orange strawflowers, safflowers, orange globe amaranths, golden drumstick, yellow strawflowers, marigolds, yellow statice, autumn leaves, and marsh hay.

When November gives way to December make room for the more regal and restrained reds and greens of Christmas-time and Kwanzaa (whose traditional colors also include black) or the traditional white, blue, and silver of Hanukkah. According to Ana, copper, bronze, and gold are the metallic trends for this year. “Chocolate brown, chartreuse, and lime green are also popular,” says Ana, and make for a nice backdrop for the various shades of rich red we always associate with Christmas.

To make the transition from November to December in terms of floral décor, Ana advises to remove the oranges and yellows, keep the deep reds and greens, and build from there.

Of all the various holiday floral decorations available, the wreath is a staple and symbol of the winter festive season. Replete with ancient and spiritual symbolism, its circular form conjures basic images of the continuity and renewal of life and friendship. Christmas-time ten or twenty years ago, a single wreath was placed on the door to welcome visitors. Today, wreaths are everywhere. I’ve seen them on cars. One just isn’t enough. If you haven’t done so already, December is the month to put up a wreath, or two, or three...

“For outdoor wreaths,” says Ana, “if you can, be sure to add spotlights to highlight the wreath at night. From afar, a lighted wreath makes the home look warm and inviting, as do single electric candles in the windows.” And don’t forget the strings of outdoor lights. Wrap and roll bunches of light strands into a wreath, drape them over flower boxes, and twist them into garlands around handrails. A simple and inexpensive lighting idea for outdoors are strategically placed glass jars aflame with small votive candles.

Another floral staple is the centerpiece. While Carol Mello of Regali & Fiore in Fairhaven doesn’t recommend a dated centerpiece with a single, central candle, candles may be used with care in floral centerpieces, either paired symmetrically, or grouped in trios of various heights. Plant candles in antique terracotta flower pots adorned with green moss and red and burgundy velvet ribbon or float them, as Ana does, in tall glass cylinders full of water and lady-finger apples and ivy.

Carol uses both fresh and artificial floral material in her centerpieces. “Good artificial flowers, while more expensive, can last upwards of twenty years if stored carefully after use,” she explains. Over the past decade, the technology of synthetic materials has improved enormously and provides the basis for beautiful life-like blooms and foliage. Says Carol, “Expect to pay 30 - 40% more for a high-end artificial arrangement than for a fresh one. But it’s worth it since it’ll last such a long time.”

Investing in good artificial flowers makes economical sense. Building a stock of quality artificial flowers for use throughout the years can, in the long run, keep floral decorating costs down, not only for institutions that have high floral decorating needs, but for individuals as well. Combined with fresh foliage, they make a pleasing low-maintenance addition to floral décor for the holidays and all year round.

Topiaries are another popular and attractive addition to holiday floral design, adding height and drama. Shaped in wreath form, miniature rotund trees, and traditional conical tree shapes, short or tall, they too come fresh or artificial. Carol recommends a topiary of fragrant creamy white gardenias.

Which brings us to flowers. Perhaps the most popular and well-known winter holiday flower in North America is the poinsettia. Its large pointed leaves come in vibrant velvety red, creamy white, and pink. When buying poinsettias, don't purchase plants that have been displayed close together since crowding can cause premature bract loss. Check the plant's soil. If it's wet and the plant is wilted, this could be an indication of root rot.

In addition to the poinsettia, consider red and white roses or tulips, creamy white hydrangeas, and stunning amaryllis and narcissus. Start forcing bulbs ahead of when you want them to begin blooming: six to eight weeks for amaryllis and four to six weeks for narcissus.

Planning ahead helps insure all is in place when the holiday arrives. If ordering a professionally arranged floral centerpiece, try to pick it up the day of or day before you need it. Check florists' hours and holiday closing dates.

Finally, there's the tree. Of all the holiday floral decorations, the tree takes the Christmas cake! And like any scrumptious dessert – after the fruit and vegetables and other winter greens – I have left it for last. Christmas trees are put up and decorated in homes across the world, reflecting the customs and traditions of a place and its people. Christmas trees sparkle magically with delicate ornaments, garlands of tinsel, and twinkling lights. Children young and old who have grown up with the annual custom of having a Christmas tree in the home will forever tell tales of the awe they've felt while gazing upon their lighted tree – that evening, remember, when the lights were low and a fire crackled in the fireplace, when presents lay piled high, and somewhere nearby, Christmas carols – with their messages of peace, hope, and goodwill to all – rang clear and sweet.

Side Box:

Amaryllis Care Tips

Amaryllis (*Hippeastrum*) is easily brought to bloom by following a few easy steps:

- **PLANTING:** Plant the bulb up to its neck in rich soil and place in a warm lighted area (68 – 70 degrees F). Water sparingly until the stem begins to grow and then more as the stem, buds, and blooms develop. Blooms will appear between 7 and 10 weeks.
- **AFTER BLOOM CARE:** After its initial bloom, coax your amaryllis to flower again. Cut the old flowers from the stem. When the stem starts to sag, cut it back to the top of the bulb.
- **FOLIAGE:** For healthy development, water and fertilize as normal for at least 5 – 6 months, allowing the leaves to fully develop and grow.

- **BULB STORAGE:** Once the leaves begin to yellow, cut them back to 2 inches from the top of the bulb. Remove the bulb from the soil, clean it, and store in a cool, dark place for 6 – 12 weeks. A temperature of about 55 degrees F is recommended. *Caution:* do not store amaryllis near fruit. Gases emitted from ripening fruit will sterilize the bulbs.
- **REPLANTING:** After dormancy, plant the bulbs again as described above.