

Green – 'Tis the Season

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By Paula Bandy

So many of our modern holiday traditions evolved from the ancient celebrations of winter's solstice. Practiced around December 21st, when the northern hemisphere experiences the longest night of the year, people throughout the world have celebrated the delights of nature, sought the return of the sun, and revered the earth as the bountiful source of life. Winter begins with this longest night leading us back into light as days begin to lengthen. And this time holds within it viriditas, literally, greenness, and the return of the greening power. Old traditions embrace the renewal and infusion of evergreens and plants blooming amidst the snow, like holly, ivy and mistletoe, and bring them into our lives and homes.

Our ancestors gathered the greens, believed to have power over death, to invoke rebirth and renewal into what seemed a dead, or at the least, dormant world. They lit candles symbolizing the glow of the returning sun and the light of life. At the solstice, light opens the way between the worlds of winter's deathly chill and the promise of the greening and renewal. So what better time to incorporate 'going green' into our daily lives than in our traditional practices of honoring the earthly greens and not the commercial green of dollars spent.

Frequently, modern times force our daily lives to run at an accelerated pace. We hardly have a moment to think, let alone create beauty. Yet, when we do, we most often think of how we need to rush out and buy lavish and glitzy things. This isn't necessarily the best practice. Hopefully, this article will allow you to find ideas for "green" holiday decorations that require little time, expense and energy.

So, bring the outdoors in. For nature's inspiration, simply look outside your window. This article is an invitation to change old patterns, develop new and more purposeful traditions, to live more lightly upon our earth, and to create your own special magic instead of following along with the affluenza of commercialism. If you want more ideas and information than is here, pick up a copy of *Green Christmas: How to Have a Joyous, Eco-Friendly Holiday Season*, from your local bookseller, of course.

Why Go Green for the Holidays?

Sobering Facts

- Each year between Thanksgiving and the New Year Americans generate 25 million extra tons of garbage-25% more than during the rest of the year. (source: Green Christmas)
- Catalogs eat up some 8 million trees every year; many choose to opt out of the catalog frenzy at www.catalogchoice.org
- Purchase recycled products. If you can't find it locally try www.realgreengoods.com
- Oregon ranks #1 in Christmas trees harvested and #2 in tree farms.
- Approximately 25-30 million trees are sold for Christmas each year; for each tree harvested, up to 3 seedlings are planted the following spring; average growing time is 7 years but can be as long as 16.

(source: www.christmastree.org/home.cfm)

- Approximately 1.9 billion holiday greeting cards are sold consuming 300,000 trees. (source: Green Christmas) Make sure your cards are made from recycled materials and/or recyclable, or send e-cards. Try www.threeleafcards.com (personalized greetings with a conscience!).
- Americans will toss about 4 million tons of wrapping paper and shopping bags into the trash during the holiday season, yet almost all of it can be recycled. The rule of thumb is, if it's not shiny or glittery and if it rips, it's paper and thus recyclable.
- LEDs use about 80% less energy than incandescent bulbs. They're estimated to last 50,000 hours which equals 8 hours a day for 17 years. Use everywhere you can-outside and inside. If not available locally, try www.christmaslightsanddecorations.com or www.christmaslightsetc.com
- 70% of discretionary purchases are made during the holidays when we tend to be less discriminating in making green choices. Put the plastic away and pay attention to your green thumb!

Food, Flora & Tabletop Landscapes

Food and flowers make a natural pairing. No one element brings the garden indoors the way floral bouquets do. While winter may not be the best time to pick flowers in your garden, we have access to fresh flowers in shops (however, their carbon footprint can be quite high). Keep in mind that there are many plants available in our part of the world all winter long that are suitable for indoor use. Holly, mistletoe, and evergreen boughs to name a few. When using flowers and greens at mealtimes, they should be chosen to complement the food and table setting. Bowls of fruit with tender, and edible flowers tucked in is unconventional, but a beautiful invitation for nibbling.

Aromatic herbs are available year round in most grocery stores or better yet, grow your own. They can be placed in small vases with a little water and set around the table. Your family and guests can pick and choose their own fresh herbs to complement their meals. What a treat! Herbs also beg to be bundled. Tie them with string or recycled ribbon and hang the herbs from your mantel, garlands, tree, chandeliers and wrapped gifts. Enjoy the gentle whiffs of lavender, rosemary or mint as you pass by the tree or unwrap a present.

View your tabletop as a canvas. You can bring out your green decorating intentions by creating a 'landscape' to eat by, and ultimately, a landscape to eat! Create a beautifully abundant centerpiece by filling a wooden bowl with vegetables-dark leafy greens, heads of cauliflower, broccoli florets, figs, long stringy beans, artichokes, eggplant, garlic and any seasonal veggies available. Let them drape and tumble and enhance their earthy design with flickering candlelight. Use natural fabrics like linen and hemp and scatter a few vegetables around the table to balance the theme. Turn off the electric lights and bring in some outdoor lanterns to complete the mood. Tablescape are about bringing the outdoors in.

The Magic of Light

burning. Through the centuries people have lit bonfires along rivers and mountain tops as signs of communication-warnings, celebrations, invitations. During the holidays in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the flickering light from farolitos enchants the sidewalks, fences, stairways, rooftops and any available ledge wide enough to hold one. Creating Rios de Luces, rivers of light, these charming lanterns are simple and easy to make from brown paper lunch bags found in grocery stores. They are simply filled with sand, a tea light is placed inside (for more safety you can place the tea light in a small, reusable glass jar). Light and let the flame shine through. Designs can be cut on the sides, a snowflake, face, tree, star, or they can be decorated with colored inks and pens. This is a great project for children where they can see their artwork glow!

Bring your outdoor lanterns in for the season, set out the candles and turn off the electric lights. Put stones, small pinecones, cranberries, nuts, marbles, or colored pasta in glass jars and then place a candle pillar on top. Beeswax candles can scent the room lightly with a natural and fresh fragrance and can easily be made at home. Here's another mini-lesson. Buy cotton wicks (made for beeswax and not paraffin) and sheets of beeswax from a craft store, then cut to size. Place the wick on the edge of the wax sheet (extended about 1" from each end) and roll tightly, but delicately, using the warmth from your hands to meld together. When rolled use your warmth to gently press in the full edge of the wax so the candle stays rolled. Trim base of wick flush to candle and top of wick to 1/2". Honestly, you can do this!

A good source for fun and easy to make lanterns is *Magic Lanterns*, by Mary Maguire, a treasure book full of beautiful and imaginative projects with explicit and illustrated instructions. What would the winter holidays be without a fireplace? We are all too aware of the pollution created with burning wood, not to mention the rising cost of wood today. Ah, what to do? Cozy up to an alternative fire! Burn fire logs made from recycled materials. There are now logs made from completely renewable resources that produce 80% fewer emissions than traditional fires. Believe it or not, check out the Duraflame website and look into their approach to green fires www.duraflame.com.

Now that you are glowing let's move on to...

Green & Growing: The Tree

Trees are our friends; our ancestors took shelter, prayed, slept under, and in, trees. Forests and sacred groves were the original holy sanctuaries. Early Christian fathers had trouble getting people to gather inside for services, so in order to lure people, the earliest Gothic cathedrals were designed to resemble the ancient forests of pre-Christian worshippers. The Roman Empire celebrated Kalends in early January by the adorning of their Tree of Life, a large green tree, with fruit, laurel and candles. Evergreens continued to be used and decorated throughout the centuries. Legend has it that Martin Luther set up an evergreen covered with candles representing the stars of heaven. Some say that it wasn't until the reign of Queen Victoria, who, along with Prince Albert, decorated their Christmas tree at Balmoral with wax dolls, candies and dried fruit, that the idea caught on and became tradition.

Green decorating is about creating a sanctuary of health and renewal. But what is more 'green', a real tree or an artificial tree? It appears that the bottom line is this: because Christmas trees are specifically grown for this purpose and can be wholly recycled they are better than a plastic, PVC, manufactured tree arriving at a

U.S. port on a slow boat from China (more information is available at this site: www.christmastree.org/faketrees.cfm). Keep in mind, if you do buy a fake tree, that there are U.S. manufactured lead-free trees available; check out www.uschristmastree.com. And if you do choose to buy a real tree, make every effort to buy from a local farm. It benefits the local

the tree down, remember that it can be recycled in the form of rich mulch, which will ultimately assist in the process of growing new green matter!

Variations on a Green Theme

Give the gift of a tree to your city or neighborhood community. Plant it, care for it, gather round it and decorate it!

Make a Christmas tree for the birds (this is especially great for kids). Set a Christmas tree up outside where it can be easily viewed. Gather pinecones of various sizes and attach ribbons, wire or thread to pinecones for hanging. Coat each in peanut butter (you can also use lard). It's easiest to buy the large jars so you can slip the pinecones down into the peanut butter. Fill containers with a variety of bird seeds and dip the peanut butter coated pinecones into the seeds. Hang onto the trees. It may take a day or two for the birds to discover your tree but soon it will be a feast for the feathered community.

Living trees are beautiful as gifts for yourself and others. If you prefer to cut down on cutting down but want a tree in your home, this is a great way to go. You can purchase a green, living tree from your local nursery and decorate it. It could be an evergreen or a fruit tree depending on your climate. If you want to plant it outside ask for advice on the transition from house to outdoors; also inquire about what kind of care is required and what trees have the best survival rate in your area. If you want to keep it inside year-round, ask questions on care, feeding, and pruning and make a choice for the tree determined by your time availability and lifestyle.

Who needs a whole tree, when you can actually just gather branches and boughs. Evergreen branches offer wonderful shapes and design possibilities. You can leave them in their natural state, or frost them (see Frosted Fruit in sidebar). Place them in a vase of natural materials like birch bark, a copper pot, or glass vase. Arrange greenery or pinecones around the base. Hang ornaments, bundles of herbs, ribbons, paper snowflakes, crystals on them. And when the season is over they can be placed back on the land and left as nature intended.

Though topiaries and bonsai can be expensive, the beauty of these unique natural wonders is that they can be used and redecorated for different holidays throughout the year.

And finally, a decorating trick that any college student can relate to: simply hang your favorite ornaments on an already existing plant in the room. One year when I lived in Arizona, my mother decided to use our very large cactus. We draped it in ornaments, pinecones and garlands. Magic happened that year when it snowed in Phoenix on Christmas Day and my father had to cancel his golf game!

Wreaths & Garlands

The use of wreaths at this time of year is symbolic of the circle of life, the wheel of seasons and continuous renewal of life. Although I have seen some exquisitely decorated wreaths, I prefer the simple, fragrant ones. Wreaths of pinecones and evergreen show off the natural beauty of the greenery and need no other embellishment. A few years ago, a couple of friends showed up with a pile of different types of evergreens. The forest service had just gone through the woods and pruned the trees, leaving the boughs underneath. My friends hated to see them go to waste so they brought them to me. I bought a large wreath frame from a florist and started wiring on

and fir we are blessed with in this region.

Of course, you don't have to make your own wreath as usually many are readily available, but the fun of gathering boughs and crafting your own, inhaling the scent of nature in every breath, could become your very own family tradition and hold you delicately in your personal wheel and renewal of life. Oh, and did I mention that they make great, inexpensive gifts?

Garlands are equally simple to make and can be created as small, or large, short or long as needed. Wiring the boughs together is simple and berries, ornaments, pinecones, and herbs can be tied on or gently tucked in once the garland is in place. As some of you may know, I am a fan of pinecones, as if one can be such a thing, so, naturally, I love making garlands of pinecones and beads. (See sidebar, p. 7.)

Pinecones, Pomanders & Spicy Aromatics

And while we're on the subject of pinecones! It seems nothing reminds of us the winter holidays like warm and spicy fragrances. Pinecones, pomanders and cinnamon sticks are traditional favorites (hint: use the cinnamon available at your local florist's – it is lower than food grade and therefore less expensive). Tie bundles of them together and place in bowls for a delightfully warm look and spicy fragrance.

Pomanders from the French “pomme d'ambre,” or apple of amber, invite a deep breath. They may seem old-fashioned but they are better than any chemically laced potpourri on the market. (See sidebar,

p. 7.) In a glass bowl place several oranges on the bottom, then decorate more as pomanders. Be creative. Cover some completely with cloves; place spiral, stripes and other designs on some. Layer them on the oranges. Then tuck in a few sprigs of pine for additional scent and texture. Pomanders also make lovely presents. These aromatic spheres were once carried and given as gifts by medieval kings. Shop your local flea markets or vintage shops for bowls and saucers befitting the gift recipient's style. Place pomander(s) in a nest of recycled paper and tie with fabric or ribbon. Top off with a sprig of greenery.

Scented pinecones are easy to make but require a little time to develop. Using essential oils such as cinnamon, vanilla, eucalyptus, or peppermint, brush small amounts of the oils onto the pinecones. Place the pinecones in sealed containers and let sit for a few days. Check the fragrance and add more if needed.

Another easy and beautiful decoration are cardamom pears. Get floral foam from your florist and carve into a pear shape. Place a twig into the top and stud the pear with cardamom pods secured with glue. Simply lovely!

And a Few Final Ideas...

- Go to your kitchen cupboards to find goods to decorate your tree. Small tangerines, strings of cranberries, even popcorn make lovely, edible, and more importantly environmentally friendly decorative choices. Or do what Queen Victoria and Prince Albert did, hang decorated whole walnuts on your tree. Very posh!

- If you do choose to buy new decorations, take care to buy ornaments made with sustainable materials and perhaps shop at markets that offer free-trade goods (there are a few in our region).
- Decorate your chandelier or overhanging lamp and chain with greens and branches, berries and fruit, hanging with fishing line from the lights.
- Gift wrap presents using fabric, even old patterned shirts or funky knit sweaters (always reusable), recycled paper, aluminum foil, newspaper, or simple brown paper tied with natural twine and decorated with twigs, dried flowers, small bundles of fresh herbs. Wrap with imagination and the earth in mind.

Decorating for the holidays provides so many ways to go green. My suggestion is to start with a natural theme; I promise you'll find that less glitz and less electricity equals more tranquility (and more green in your wallet). You'll appreciate this during the holiday rush. Think green and sustainable before you rush out to the big box stores for more plastic this holiday season. Buy local. With the strained economy we need to take care of our local communities first. Benevolence and beneficence...these are the true decorations for creating bountiful, still...green...holiday season.