

Holly, Winterberry, and Bittersweet for Holiday Decorating

Local favorites are easy to find and beautiful

Lee Carvalho, for the Beacon

November and December can be a delightful time to walk in the woods, along streams, around the lakes, and through the fields of Andover. Clad in bright orange because of hunting season, I have been enjoying the chance to visit some favorite haunts now that the leaves are down, and the views go on forever. It's also a great time to gather natural materials for decorations to help



Winterberry.

celebrate the yule or solstice.

Any arrangement is perked up by some branches of winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*) with its bright red berries. Because winterberry is one of the deciduous hollies that drops its leaves in the fall, these densely packed berries show up well on the gray branches. The berries last well into winter – hence its English name. You can find winterberry growing wild all around Andover, mostly on the edges and shallows of wetlands but also in sandy soil. I noticed a lot of winterberry under the powerlines in East Andover and along the outflow from Hopkins Pond. Birds love the berries, too, so if you cut some, be sure to leave plenty.

Another eye-catcher supplied by mother nature is the bittersweet vine (*Celastrus scandens*), native to central and eastern North America. These perennial vines produce greenish yellow flowers in the spring, but it's their next display that makes them special. In the summer each flower is replaced with an orange-yellow capsule which opens in

the late fall revealing a bright red berry. The combination of orange and red is spectacular, lasts into the winter, and



Bittersweet.

attracts hungry wildlife as well as human decorators. Be aware of the similar Asiatic bittersweet, an invasive vine that threatens other species with its aggressive twining that can strangle trees and shrubs. American bittersweet's fruits are always in clusters at the end of stems, while Asiatic bittersweet's fruits are found in joints where leaves grow. Do not collect and use its fruiting stems as that will promote its spread.

A symbol of the season since medieval days, the European holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) appears in carols, on greeting cards, and back in the iron age, in wreaths worn by druids. The contrast between its bright green, glossy, leaves

and red berries make it a popular holiday decoration. It may be challenging to find holly trees in Andover other than those planted by homeowners, but I'd love to know if you do.

Another fine harvesting idea, not exactly original but still worthwhile, is to use small logs as candle sticks. The prettiest ones I've seen were made from white birch branches, but you can use pine or another type of wood. Look for a branch that has a relatively straight section with



Holly.

diameter about 3". Cut it to be whatever height you want but be sure both ends are flat. You can use a spade drill to make a shallow hole in one end that will hold a votive tea candle (1.5" diameter) or use a smaller drill to make a deeper hole that will support a taper candle.

Maybe these ideas will provide some incentive to get out of your chair, bundle up, and head outside. Happy Harvesting and Happy Holidays!



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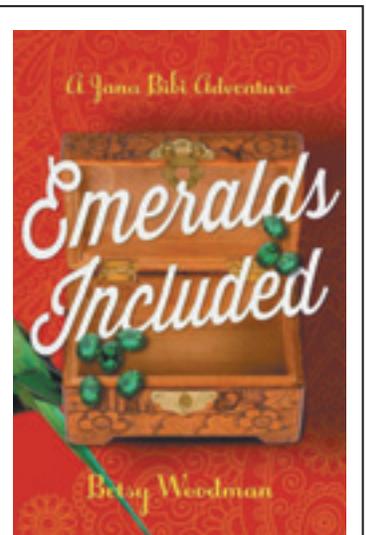
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