

# Christmas wreaths *Rebekah Panayides*

Last December amid all the hustle and bustle of organising a family Christmas - the endless shopping, school carol services, costumes for nativity plays and attempts to finish card writing, I spent a lovely calm morning making Christmas wreaths. The inspiration to create my own came from the lovely dark red cornus stems growing in my garden and a bunch of freshly-cut, green willow wands. Together they looked very festive and perfect for the basis of a wreath. Not having done this before I invited a couple of like-minded friends around to help. Our aim was to create natural-looking, stylish wreaths that we'd proudly hang on our front doors, from foliage I had growing in the garden - and of course have a chat and mince pie or two at the same time.

A few days before we started I went foraging in the garden and hedgerows for evergreens, berries, fir cones and seed heads. I collected anything I thought would be suitable and tough enough to last for a couple of weeks hung on a busy front door. We laid it all out on the kitchen table along with florist's wire, string and secateurs and set to work. The base of our wreath was made from the thin, whippy cornus and willow stems. These were about 1-1.5m long and all this year's growth, so thin and very pliable. Starting with a single stem we wound this into a circular shape - weaving the thinner end around the thicker one and holding in place (beware, they can flick back at speed!) Other branches were then added to build up a framework and the wreath slowly became self-supporting. The combination of colours looked great and, as they were freshly cut, would remain vivid for several weeks. Once the framework was as big as required we added long stems of ivy, winding them around the wreath and fixing them by poking the ends into gaps in the framework or attaching with florists' wire. Next came colour in the form of orange slices which I'd dried in a slow oven; fresh, home-grown red and orange chillies and fir cones. These were attached to the frame using thin wire to pierce the chillies and oranges to secure them and a thicker gauge for the fir cones wrapped around the base before fixing to the wreath. Clusters of these were grouped together a bit like a corsage, backed by the fluffy plumes of miscanthus grass and the translucent oval windows of honesty seed heads. Gaps were left in between these groupings of colour so that the beauty of the framework could still be clearly seen underneath.

If you don't have coloured or whippy stems in the garden to make the framework you could still make a home-made wreath using a wire frame bought from a florist and then adding your own foliage. These double-ringed frames

need to be packed with a filler such as moss, bracken, ivy or silver birch stems, wired into place, to form the body of your framework. When it comes to adding the foliage, evergreens are really easy to combine and the different shades and textures of green blend beautifully.

The joy of using your own vegetation is that you'll have a much wider range of unusual material to play around with. For example, you could contrast the shiny leaves of bay or laurel with the matt feathery foliage of leylandii or rosemary and the tiny red-edged leaves of hebe. Try adding white or yellow variegated foliage - euonymus, ivy or eleagnus. Grey or glaucous foliage such as blue spruce, eucalyptus, artemesia, phlomis or senecio also work well. You could even scour the hedges for lichen covered branches, fir cones and traveller's joy - there really are endless possibilities.

If you want colour and you haven't got anything bright in the garden - head to the supermarket for limes, kumquats and chillies, your local florist may have seasonal or tropical foliage, or rummage in the decorations box for some festive sparkle.

We were really pleased with our first time efforts and I'm happy to report that they all made it to our front doors and even received a few compliments! We will definitely be making Christmas wreaths again - it's a great way to spend a few hours with friends getting into that festive spirit without having to spend lots of money or visit the crowded shops. It's also a good excuse to wander out in the garden and make use of your evergreens - you may even find yourself viewing them in a different light. And when you finally hang your finished work of garden art on the door on the gate or inside the house, it will be there to greet you and raise a smile each time you race in and out of the house amid the festive chaos. *Rebekah gardens in West Sussex.*

