When the holiday season arrives I look forward to decorating our home and deck with wreaths, arrangements, evergreen boughs and tree decorations gathered from nature’s harvest. For me, natural crafts make holiday decorating special, from gathering the berries and branches to the personal touches I add to an arrangement. There is an impressive variety of natural materials available to add a special glow to the holidays. You can gather them in the wild, get permission from a property owner or plant them in your own garden. Plan ahead and make your holiday designs unique using these beautiful plants that can be gathered outdoors.

**Evergreen Boughs.** I collect a variety of evergreen branches for holiday decorating, taking advantage of the different textures and various shades of green. Evergreen branches, gathered and bunched together, are fastened with wire to form a fan shape. These fans can be wired on a railing, fence or post, using the next fan to overlap and hide the wire and bare stems. One fan may contain a variety of evergreens, but I usually place the largest needled pines at the base and the finer textures on top. A good fan may have scotch or Austrian pine at the base, with eastern redcedar or juniper branches, blue spruce, concolor fir, Canada hemlock, Douglas fir or Japanese yew. For holiday decorating, evergreen boughs can be thought of as the “filler” in the arrangement. Pine cones can be added later for highlights.

**Jolly Holly.** The best evergreen holly to grow in Nebraska for holiday decorating is the meserve holly hybrid, blue princess. This holly, with its lustrous, dark green foliage and abundant dark red fruit, grows well here on the Plains. For fruit set, you need to plant a “Blue Prince” holly for every three or four “Blue Princess.” For indoor container arrangements, I push holly stems into wet floral foam along with pine, spruce, dogwood stems or other plants that are being used fresh. Adding water to the foam blocks every day will help foliage last for several weeks.

**Bark Brilliance.** Red-stemmed and yellow-stemmed dogwoods provide a nice vertical accent in evergreen arrangements or pine boughs. Try using the bright golden stems of willows or the rich purple-black stems of pussy willow. The peeling bark of river birch or white paper birch makes great wallpaper for ornaments, a stylish birdhouse or for the nativity scene.

**A Very Berry Christmas.** Cut branches of fruiting shrubs, trees and vines make great holiday decorations. Dependable choices for wreaths, swags, mantel decorations or outdoor containers include:

- Crabapples are excellent for containers, slipped into boughs or frozen into ice luminaries.
- Viburnums have persistent berries.
- Coralberry has purplish-red fruits clustered on thin arching stems. It lasts a long time in arrangements and is a favorite for wreaths and swags.
- Rugosa and redleaf roses have long-lasting rose hips.
- Osage-orange can be cut in half-inch slices, dried and left plain or painted, then fastened with a hanger for the Christmas tree.
- Black walnut can be glued to garlands or gathered in baskets.
- Bittersweet looks great combined with evergreens; clusters should be harvested before the fruit opens.
- Bayberry has fragrant, semi-evergreen foliage and waxy gray fruit clusters that are a natural for almost any arrangement.
- Acorns, hawthorne, snowberry, sweetgum, hazelnuts, common alder, baldcypress cones, sumac heads, quince fruit, eastern wahoo, winterberry holly and cotoneaster can all add a special touch to any arrangement or decorative bowl.
Make your own wreath backing using the long, durable vines of wild grape, Virginia creeper or sweet autumn clematis.