



Winter Containers Dianne and Gary Westlake

Winter decorations are a pretty big deal at our house and this year's operation is starting now. If you stand still for too long around our place, you are liable to get decorated. When White Rose was still in town, we used to call a visit to the store “docking with the mother ship” and occasionally when the store was running low on stock they would call us to see if we could help them out.

A large part of our decorating outdoors, involves what we do with the containers that have been growing annuals all summer. The plants in them have now turned to mush with the frost. We use the containers as the base for winter decorating, putting in arrangements that usually last until March.

After the summer annuals have succumbed to the cold temperatures, we just cut them off, rather than dig them up. The root ball serves as an anchor to help hold the plant material in place. We are careful to choose a container that is made of plastic, metal, concrete or fiberglass. Ceramic or terra cotta containers are likely to break when they freeze.

We collect boughs of hemlock, cedar, spruce, pine and yew from a friend’s property but if you are not so lucky, this material can be obtained at most garden centres. The advantage of going to a garden centre is that they usually have some interesting varieties that are not found in this area.

We try to cut some cedar in early October because it tends to go brown with the colder temperatures at this time of year. Just store in a protected spot in the shade. Loosely cover the pile with a sheet of plastic and sprinkle with water periodically. You are able to cut most other evergreens at any time.

Choose a time when the weather is pleasant to work so this is not an ordeal. A crust of frozen soil on the top can be dealt with using a screwdriver. Our experience has taught us that it is wise get this done before the soil freezes solid. Otherwise you will be forced to bring your containers into the house to thaw or use some sort of power tool to make the holes.

The whole process is simple, and anyone can do it. Begin inserting the boughs into the soil starting with the heaviest ones. Use lots! You can put more in than you might expect so do not skimp. Using in a variety of evergreens provides a variety of colours and makes the container more interesting. You can even flip the boughs upside down to get a different look.

Once you have the container filled to the brim with foliage, it is time to embellish your creation. Silver, gold and red are festive choices. Red works very well because it is a complimentary colour for green. Red makes green look greener and vice versa.

Red osier dogwood branches or sumac are plentiful and are easily inserted. They add height as well as colour. One thing you can do is cut off your larger sedums, allow to dry for a week or two, then spray paint them red. Any kind of red spray paint should work. These make great additions to your containers but you might have to make a hole for them in the soil with a stick because the stems are not as strong as the branches.

Before you start to add accessories to your arrangement, consider final location of your container. If it will be placed in an exposed area, additions will need to be able to take the winds and snow but placement in a sheltered place means you can use more fragile items. Another consideration is the viewing audience. The pots at the front door should be extraordinary – fuller, with more interesting adornment. You might even consider having a pot in the garden for the birds or squirrels using dried or fresh fruit, seed balls or nuts to tempt them.

Decide upon the style or effect you wish. Natural or stylized, modern or Victorian –you are only limited by your imagination and creativity.

Natural accents may include interesting seed heads like poppy, globe thistle, sea holly, hydrangea, or milkweed pods. Pine cones also work well. These can be spray painted or left in their natural state. rose hips or fruit like pomegranate, oranges or lemons add interest.

Wiring an object to a bamboo skewer or stick is an easy way to secure an object in the arrangement. Just find the spot and stick it in.

Bead balls made by using a glue gun to affix bead garland to a Styrofoam ball, fake birds or unbreakable ornaments and all add interest. Even a festive ribbon can be added for the Christmas season. A string of mini lights will add interest if you have a power source nearby.

Embellishments that look holiday specific can be removed after the holiday. Why not decorate for Valentines Day or St Patrick's Day.

Once you have completed your creation, it is time to show it off. Elevate or use a spotlight to show it to its best advantage. Place the container, whether at the front door or at the end of your driveway, and then water it well and allow it to freeze. The moisture in the frozen soil will keep the boughs looking great until it is time to consider the spring container

Hope you have a great winter. We are going to take a break from writing articles and hope to see you all next year. Enjoy planning and dreaming about what you are going to do in your garden in the spring.

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