

# Naturally Festive

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*Gardeners shouldn't  
despair the end of  
the outdoor season.*

*Using natural  
elements in holiday  
decorations can  
satisfy the inner  
gardener in all of us.*



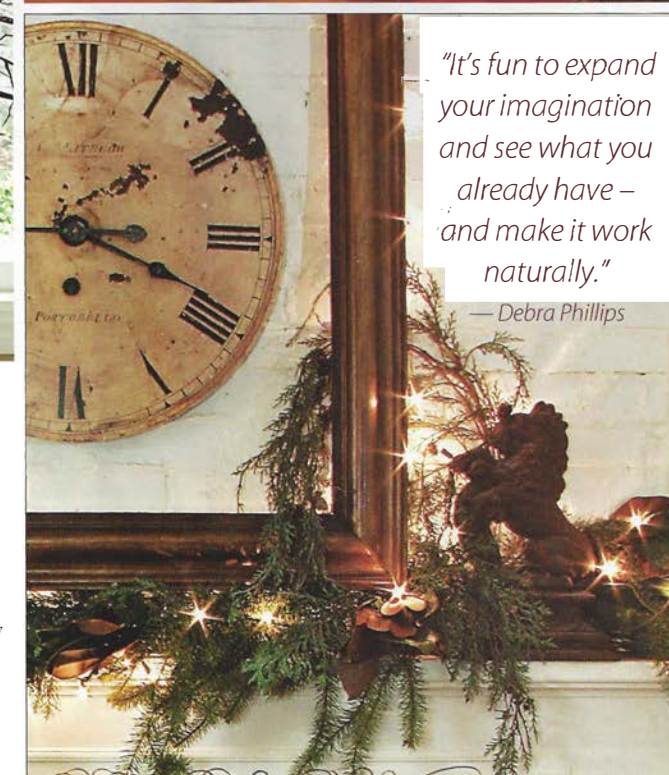
Above: On the adjoining wall, Debra Phillips mounted a New Orleans street lamp, sliced in half. Greens spill out around a battery-powered candle, emitting a fire-safe glow. Right: The texture and color of angel vine provides a natural contrast to the deep green spruce top, set in water.







Natural elements dominate Phillips' living room mantel: variegated and western cedar, quail eggs tucked into "birds' nests" fashioned from angel vine, elegant pheasant feathers, miscanthus grass, pine cones, and paperwhites—for height and aroma.



*"It's fun to expand your imagination and see what you already have – and make it work naturally."*

— Debra Phillips

Above: The fireplace mantel in Phillips' bedroom incorporates the rich brown of magnolia leaves into blue cone cedar, all intertwined with tiny white lights. Top: Baby tears cluster around bright red cyclamen blooms in an architectural resin vase, creating natural Christmas color.

**S**littery ornaments adorning a tinsel-draped tree. Overstuffed Santas. Legions of brightly lacquered nutcrackers. Bright red and green—here, there, and everywhere. It's the holidays, all right—but maybe you're yearning for a little less glitz and a lot more of what makes you feel so good in your garden: flowers, grasses, textured birds' nests, and the pleasure of living plants. It's possible to satisfy your inner gardener—even in December—if you just turn to nature as the inspiration for your seasonal decorating.

We visited with two passionate gardeners for different takes on how to create a naturally festive home for the holidays. Debra Phillips is a landscape designer and owner of Scintimental

Gardens in Geneva, and Nancy Clifton is a horticulturist at the Chicago Botanic Garden, where she's worked for twenty years.

Both Phillips and Clifton believe it's unnecessary to move all the furniture and upend the household to fit in all the Christmas paraphernalia. "I don't rush out and buy everything," says Phillips. "I look at what I have and try to make my holiday decorating blend in." Instead of the usual bright red and green, she relies on her existing palette of rusty reds, sage greens, and cream as the jumping-off point in her 1840's farmhouse, which she bought 16 years ago. After tossing out the blue aluminum siding and unseemly kitchen linoleum, she renovated the century-

and-a-half-old building to create a haven of stunning simplicity, a perfect backdrop for showing off nature.

In most homes the fireplace mantel acts as a Christmas focal point. Phillips has two. In her living room, bowls of paperwhites add height and a heavenly scent at either end of the mantel, with variegated and western cedar intermixing along its length. "All cedar is good for indoors. It lasts the longest and has soft needles that don't get stuck in the carpet and jab your feet. It doesn't overpower, and the drape is beautiful."

Despite her devotion to the natural, Phillips gives a nod to the fabulous "permanents" available these days (a term being used more frequently for faux plants and flowers). "They look

absolutely real, don't make a mess, are fire resistant, and I can bend and shape them to suit my design." One of her favorite permanents is a softly hanging branch of long needle pine studded with real pine cones. Tucked in among the live greens on the mantel are little birds' nests twisted from angel vine, complete with speckled quail eggs. Miscanthus grass stems poke their fluffy heads from among the greens and foot-long Lady Amethyst pheasant feathers curve out gently.

Gracing Phillips' second fireplace in the bedroom, flat wide magnolia leaves, green on one side, brown on the other, echo her existing color scheme. Tiny white lights, interwoven into blue cone cedar and around the perimeter





Above: The chartreuse of hedge apples and real apples form an attractive pairing of greens with just a touch of red. Left: Decorated with varied greens, winterberry, and a festive bow, an antique German sled greets visitors at the front entrance.

of a large square frame propped on the mantel, cast a gentle glow. The ambience is an invitation to curl up in bed with a good book with carols playing softly in the background.

Throughout the year in the den, Phillips displays her cherished collection of antique dog-themed small sculptures, paintings, and photos. For the holidays, she simply hangs a wreath of Oregonia grape, whose leaves are similar to boxwood, from a wide burlap ribbon over the sofa. "The burlap picks up the color in the couch and is in keeping with the natural feel of this room," says Phillips. On a round side table, an architectural resin bowl with the look, but not the weight, of concrete overflows with pots of baby tears surrounding a bright red blooming cyclamen. "I love the textural contrast of the itty bitty leaves of the baby tears with the big silvery leaves of the cyclamen." It emits a crimson glow amidst the room's muted tones.

Flowers are just one way Phillips decorates with the garden in mind. "I like to bring the outdoors in at

Christmas time," she says. Besides plants and greenery, she also introduces architectural elements from her yard and beyond.

Centered on her dining room table, a stone corbel (part of the capital of a column) houses 8-year-old preserved juniper surrounded by velvety preserved moss. "I love that it always stays soft and green," she comments. At each end of the table, copper lanterns holding candles nestle into noble pine wreaths. She sets small concrete birds from her garden into angel vine nests and tucks them into the greenery.

Against the far wall, an imposing pine armoire commands the space between two windows. Phillips clusters clay pots on the top, surrounding them with live blue-cone cedar, permanent winterberry ("real winterberry turns black") and sprays of miscanthus grass stems to echo those on the mantel across the room. "It's fun to expand your imagination and see what you already have – and make it work naturally."

That could be the mantra of Nancy Clifton of Gurnee as well, but she

adds a crafter's twist in her quest to incorporate nature into her Christmas decor. Clifton sees a decorative holiday use for items that others might discard. "I'm big on recycling. I think, 'Ok, the rose is dead and dying. What can I do with it now?'" After her husband had pruned their wild roses, she immediately thought of a second life for the clipped rose hip branches. Some she gathered and wound into a wreath while others she bundled into little bunches, tied with a ribbon and hung over the back of a kitchen chair to add a festive touch from her own garden. When her red oak in the back yard shed its acorns, Clifton saw an opportunity to be creative. Using a hot glue gun, she pressed the acorns onto a Styrofoam ball, creating a nubby, natural hanging sphere.

Recycling adds a unique touch to her Christmas tree too. She begins with peat pots – the kind used for tarding seedlings. "I cut little winter scenes from note cards, glue them onto the peat pots, then sponge-paint them gold. I fill the pots with moss, place

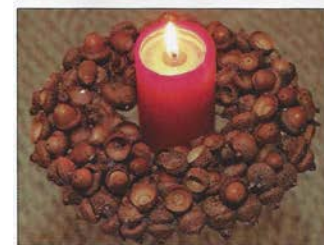
some tallow berries on top to look like tiny eggs, and add a small wooden bird from a craft store." She finishes them off by poking holes in the sides, using florist wire for hanging – and voilà, she has an assortment of bird nest ornaments for her tree. To complete the natural look, grapevine balls hang in place of glittery ornaments and feathered garland replaces silver or gold.

Like Phillips, Clifton doesn't like to take her whole house apart for the holidays. "I like to keep it simple. I start with what I have and add on." One simple way she brings a touch of the holidays to every room in her home is with natural flowers accented by sprigs of greens. "I make it a habit to buy large bouquets of flowers inexpensively at the grocery store and then break them into smaller arrangements," says Clifton. She re-uses interestingly shaped beverage bottles and keeps a collection of bubble vases.

"I put white mums with sprays of cedar in a tiny cup or vase and insert it into the middle of a rounded bubble vase. Then I can spread winterberries around the bottom and maybe spritz a bit of spray glitter onto the flowers for a touch of gold." By putting the flowers into their own interior vase, the berries don't turn moldy in water, keeping their fresh color for weeks. Instead of the berries, she might fill the vase bottom with pebbles of varied colors. White pebbles with red carnations look especially festive.

Clifton sets the tone for her interior decoration right at the entrance to her home. She gathers branches of arborvitae, Frasier fir, boxwood and winterberry, then ties them together with florist wire onto an old German sled, hiding the wire with a big festive bow. "It's easy to do, and I like it because it gives a very old-fashioned feel to Christmas." Propped next to the front door way, it's a perfect welcome to the natural world within.

"Keeping it simple" sounds like an ideal decorating approach for the hectic holidays. By going with what they have and just adding some touches of nature to their homes, Phillips and Clifton have more time to enjoy the beauty—and meaning—of the season. For the gardener, what could be more natural? *fa*



Clockwise from top: Separating large grocery store bouquets and greens, Nancy Clifton inexpensively creates multiple mini bouquets displayed in recycled, colored bottles. Carnations and greenery fill a bubble vase. Using a glue gun, Clifton decorates gifts in minutes with dried apple slices, greens, and tiny pine cones. Clifton hot-glues acorns from her backyard oak into a candle wreath. Moss, tallow berries, and a mini bird nest in a decorated peat pot hang from the tree.