



Nature's Bounty

Capture nature's bounty; you'll find the materials for natural decorations just outside your door for crafting wreaths, centerpieces and charming farmhouse décor.

By Maureen Blaney Flietner

Perhaps it's just in our nature. Those who appreciate the country, being surrounded by the beautiful bounty of the outdoors, want to capture some of it and bring it inside. And why not? It's difficult to find anything artificial that can compete with the delicate colors, intricate textures, and alluring shapes and scents of nature.

Many of us, as hobby farmers, have also grown accustomed to being thrifty. Using what's available in our surroundings for alternative uses--such as natural décor--plays right into the practical economics we live by.

Scouting the Land

Surprisingly, the materials that can make up some wonderful natural décor are often "free" items available from unusual sources. Weeds we want to eradicate--such as wild grapevines, bittersweet or teasel--become the stuff of swags and centerpieces. Cones at the base of pine or spruce trees are destined to be the stars of ornaments or wreaths. Milkweed, that life-giving plant for Monarch butterflies, offers pods excellent for arrangements. Redosier dogwood, rampant through lowlands, makes a striking accent in holiday arrangements with evergreen branches.

It doesn't end there. A handful of dried wheat. A cache of colorful fall leaves. Piles of acorns or hickory nuts. Twigs. Bouquets of dried flowers. Cornhusks. This is the stuff that natural décor is made of.

If you happen to live on an old farmstead, every year the earth seems to yield a new "crop" from the past. Bits of pottery, parts of old machinery, old square nails and other remnants of earlier lives appear on the ground and can become part of décor unique to your farm. The curlicues of an old piece of metal. A section of an old cedar fence post. A bit of barbed wire. They all have a chance to be a part of a new life on the farm.

Free Your Imagination

Hobby-farm country décor requires free rein of the imagination. Get in the proper frame of mind. Put an imaginary sign above your work space. On it, picture these words to guide you: "Everything I need is here, waiting to be discovered and appreciated."

Between what's growing and what's "found," there's abundance. Each area of the country, each farmstead, offers something special. Wear some gloves, get some clippers and a box, and start gathering.

Here are some simple projects to give your creativity a jumpstart. Then start looking at what local bounty you can transform into something special.

Project: Cone wreath

With their varied textures and earthy colors, cones have long been a popular and free material for decorations. Gather them when they're available and store them for later use. Air dry the cones or put them on a cookie sheet in a 200-degree F oven for about an hour.

For a cone wreath, you'll need: a metal wreath form flexible craft wire. Brown or green works fine. For a different effect, try a gold or copper color. needle-nose pliers, to occasionally help pull wire through the wreath form curved-nose wire clippers, to clip some cones different cone sizes and types

Until you get familiar with how much craft wire you will use to secure your cones, start with about a foot of wire. Make sure you will have a few inches of wire left at either end and then encircle the bottom layer of scales. Tuck the wire toward the base of the scales. If the cone is a smaller one, you can twist one of the wire ends tightly around the other end wire. Then anchor the cone to the metal wreath form with the now combined, single wire. For larger cones, take each end of wire and separately secure it to the metal wreath form for extra stability.

Position cones on their sides, angled, base in or base out. Make sure each wire is wrapped around a cone and then wound securely around part of the wreath form. Continue this process as you fill the form.



As the wreath shapes up, add extra touches. Take a pine cone and, with the curved wire cutters, snip off the scales until you reveal the “flower” inside. Wire the base of the clipped cone and keep the “flower” looking outward. For another look, wire the top end of a cone and put the base end out. Small, thin cones can be wired to back into any “holes” in the form. For an extra finish, hot glue some dried flowers to the wreath. Clean gently with canned compressed air.

Project: Grapevine wreath or swag

If you ignore the fact that they’re considered nuisance weeds, wild grapevines are interesting plants that are wildlife-friendly. As you gather these vines, take a moment to appreciate how tendrils allow these plants to aggressively move into the territory of other plants.

Wild grapevines basically “crawl” right over plants with a grip on bark and branches that is surprisingly strong and tight. It’s that flexibility and those tendrils that work well when you turn them into something beautiful like swags and wreaths.

Gather wild grapevines when they are young and easy to shape. You may have to unwrap the grip of some roots to keep the curly tendril look. Snip the leaves to save yourself from having to clean up dried leaves as they disintegrate. You can gather the brown, woodier plants but they will not be as easy to shape. Try to cut vines at the base; you will want each vine to be 4 to 10 feet long.

Either work with the vines right away or store them for a short time in water, formed in the circular or swag shape you want them to have. For a wreath, start with one vine and create a circle just a bit smaller than the size you want. Wind the vine around about three times and overlap the end. Use a matching or accent craft wire to hold it together.

With the next vine and each subsequent vine, start at a different place around the wreath. Weave each new vine in and out around the main wreath, being careful to allow the curly tendrils to show.

When you have built your wreath to the thickness you want and have securely anchored all of the vine ends, it’s ready for finishing touches. Among the choices could be to hot glue or wire some dried nuts or flowers, colorful leaves or eggshells.

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