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It's Christmas . . . naturally

Fresh, informal and easy: guidance on leafy decorations from *Shane Connolly*, floral designer to royalty and the seriously well-heeled

Every year I'm asked to predict the "latest trends in Christmas decor". I'm not particularly fond of the word "trend" at the best of times. And I'm especially not fond of it in the same sentence as "Christmas decor".

If you give people a trend, or a list of points to follow in order to be trendy, it all simply turns into a tick list, and then we've lost the whole spirit of Christmas as far as I'm concerned. And so I shall give my very own, untrendy, thoughts on Christmas decoration.

They are simple and, by and large, low effort; in contrast to a few of my Christmas decor fantasies which are played out vicariously through my clients.

I have two simple rules:

First, distinguish between the home and a department store. It is all about imagination and atmosphere rather than grand impressions.

Second, remember that everything has been done before, but anything inspired by nature and "homemade" is likely to be more original and interesting than anything man-made.

The idea of decorating houses for Christmas is ancient. It certainly



Connolly at the dinner table



A large door wreath made from British-grown seasonal foliage, including blue pine, Scots pine, Douglas fir, ivy, larch, holly, juniper and ilex berries

Photograph: Rick Purnomo



Larch branches with natural lichens



Ilex berries placed into green bottles



A bucket of golden ilex berries

predates Christian festivities and harks back to midwinter celebrations such as the ancient Roman Saturnalia or the old Germanic "Yule", when greenery was brought inside to decorate the home. These were all celebrations of hope and light in the darkness of winter. Bringing ivy, mistletoe and other greenery into the house, and having a meal with family and friends, was a simple reminder that spring was around the corner and

they might just live to see it. Hope is needed in winter when the long dark nights, short cold days and, until recently, scarcity of food made it a particularly gloomy time of year.

My Christmas decorations look back to that ancient world, when the midwinter festivities must have seemed especially cheering and miraculous. Foliage such as blue pine and Scots pine scents the air and reminds me of the chilly

outdoors while I am warming my toes beside the fire with glossy leaved holly and mistletoe berries glistening in candlelight around me. These plants are laden with meaning: pine symbolises hope; holly represents domestic bliss and protection (it was thought to halt a flying witch in her tracks) while mistletoe, sacred to the Druids, says "I can surmount all difficulties". A useful thought when preparing Christmas dinner.



To see Shane Connolly's tips on natural decor at Christmas, go to ft.com/naturalchristmas

Simply add ivy for friendship and a happy marriage, and Christmas rose plants (*Helleborus niger*) for "relief from anxiety" and a calmer Christmas Day will be your magnificent and original gift to the entire family this year.

Foliage can be piled above pictures and furniture in the traditional way or, as I prefer, bound into lush garlands to concentrate the effect around a mantle or over a doorway. Generally, a single

brilliant decoration is impact enough in a normal room (and it is also so much easier to clear up in January, too).

I love the effect of light through branches and so I often decorate staircases with large shapely boughs to enjoy the twiggly shadows it creates over the ceilings and walls. All very "druids in the forest" and especially magical for

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Christmas, naturally

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children. This effect can be enhanced with delicate LED fairy lights.

When it comes to the Christmas dinner table, I don't bother too much with expensive fresh flowers and instead rely on long-lasting plants. I prefer the more laid-back look they give and it also means you can set the table well in advance. So it's effortless in every way.

Paperwhites and hyacinths are traditional Christmas options, and they both certainly throw out amazing scents, but I'd also highly recommend Christmas



Staircase decorated with larch branches, tea lights, and Scots pine

rose plants in simple mossy pots. They can be planted out in a garden in the new year to flower every Christmas, which makes these decorations environmentally kinder than so many traditional types.

Small pepper plants, or even that much maligned window-box plant *Solanum*, with its bright orange berries, can look excellent in the right context. I've used both very effectively in silver pots set among great bowls full of oranges and clementines.

A sea of tea lights and candles above and below the plants create the perfect setting for Christmas dinner.

These relaxed table decorations,



The table comes to life as daylight fades and candlelight reflects on the berries and mistletoe overhead — Photograph: Rick Pothmann

Small pepper plants, or even *Solanum*, with its orange berries, can look excellent in the right context

made from collections of plants and candles, are so much more charming than traditional, formal central arrangements. It is a flexible style, too, because elements can be easily moved around to make room for pots of food or bottles of wine, and to ring the changes between one meal and the next. And everything blends together to

make a Christmas *mise en scène* along the whole table.

A luscious door wreath is the perfect foretaste of what's in store inside. My own is usually the last one of many, and so it is more often a big bunch of leftovers tied with some ribbon. In the FT.com video I'm showing off, though, with a proper circular wreath. It is made on a simple metal wreath frame (most florists have them) to which all the foliage and berries have been bound with wire. It is not as difficult as it looks. In fact, making the wreath can sometimes be seen as therapeutic "downtime" over a glass or two of something strong.

Over the years I've become associated



Harley the dog helps out

with the use of seasonal British flowers. In 2011 my designs for the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge's wedding in Westminster Abbey featured all British flowers, trees and growing plants, many from the royal estates at Sandringham and Windsor. I also work around the world from the US to India and, wherever I go, I am intrigued by the indigenous flora of each particular area. In every case I feel it is worth using that flora rather than importing ingredients from elsewhere. It is not just because it is more environmentally responsible, but also because nature always looks best in her natural surroundings.

Flamboyant bird of paradise flowers

may look spectacular in New York or London but, to my eye, they look better in their natural habitat. There the light suits their vivid palette, just as the duller, blue light of the UK and much of North America works better with the more subtle colours of the native plants found there.

So wherever you are celebrating Christmas, I hope you will take courage and create beautiful, environmentally friendly displays which lift your hearts and are in tune with your surroundings.

Shane Connolly's latest book *'Discovering the Meaning of Flowers'* (Clearview Books) comes out on Valentine's Day 2017