

The Art of Natural Wreath Making

By Sarah Edmonds



Once Thanksgiving is over, the Christmas season will be upon us. Many will adorn their doors with wreaths, a circular symbol of welcome and good fortune. Most commercial wreaths are now made of plastic, so a wreath made of natural materials can hold a special place in the hearts of gardeners and nature lovers.

Elena Kirschner is a long-time Flagstaff resident who has been making natural wreaths for over 35 years. Starting out as a river guide, gardener, and crafter, she fell in love with wreath making after a friend showed her how to make round wreaths out of fir branches.

This time of year, her living room is full of boxes of colorful straw flowers, yucca pods, rose hips, bunny tail grass, winter savory, wild buckwheat, broom corn, strawberry corn, juniper, limber pine, pinyon pine, cypress, chilis, globe amaranth, yarrow, cotton pods, and Indian rice grass.

“I always like to have fir for wreaths because it smells so good, and it lies flat, so it is good for the background,” Elena explains. She forages Douglas and white fir from either higher elevations in Flagstaff or in shady parts of Oak Creek Canyon. “I’m really committed to gentle and sustainable gathering. It is nice to be mindful to take just a tiny snip from each tree. I try to be like a deer—just a little nibble here or there.”

She loves juniper for its blue berries. This year’s is from New Mexico. Yucca seed pods, which look like beige blooming flowers, are another favorite but have been scarce this season. Crabapples have been abundant, so she’s experimenting with them. “I’m always on the lookout for beautiful things. Wreath making is in my mind and my heart all year round, even though I’m not crafting them. It has attuned me to the natural world in a different way—really paying attention to what the season is bringing. That’s the beauty of it—paying more attention to what’s happening in the natural world. Every year is so unique. Different plants are thriving or not. It is always changing.”

She also uses cultivated plants as wreath material. “I have an expert gardener friend out in the Snowflake area who grows wreath making plants for me. Here in my yard, I have every known plant predator!” One of the plants she grows is strawflowers. The flower is already dry when it blooms, but because the stem becomes brittle once it is cut, within a couple of hours after harvesting, it must be pinched off and a floral wire inserted into the flower head. The wire creates a durable and flexible stem for wreathmaking—a true labor of love!

Another project she’s working on is a memoir called “Gatherings: Collections from the Life of a Wreath Maker.” She writes, “I’ve always considered wreath-making a way to pay homage to the beauty of plants in their skeletal winter forms. Not bright colors, not fleshy fullness, but the rattling, dry woody structure left after reproduction is done and the weather turns cold. Bleached grasses and seed pods, these are my treasures... At times I let myself be swept away by these beauties and construct nest-like wreaths of only dried plant forms. ... I call these forever wreaths.”

Want to make your own? I’m thinking of all the materials that abound in my garden, some of which I’ve already disposed of, like rose hips, poppy seed pods, and black-eyed Susan heads. But I’ve still got some juniper that needs pruning, Virginia creeper I could cut, and a few pinecones strewn about.

“There’s lots of different ways to do it. You have your circle frame—however you choose to do that—whether it is vines wrapped around each other, a willow branch bent around, or you can use a metal one. Then you make little bundles, just like beautiful bouquets with a little piece of fir and pods or berries on top.” Each bundle is kept together with floral wire, then secured onto the frame. Every consecutive bundle covers the wire from the one beneath it, with the last bundle tucked in tight behind the first. For freshness, soak your wreath in the bathtub so the cut stems absorb water before hanging.

If you’d rather buy one, Elena will be selling her wreaths Dec 4 at the Handmade Holiday Market, 12-7 pm, at High Country Motor Lodge (flagstaffhandmade.com). A colleague of hers, Antoinette Reutimann, is offering holiday wreath making workshops—email areutimann.65@gmail.com for more info.

Sarah Edmonds earned a Home Horticulture Certificate from the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension in 2024.