



Photo by Susan Jonas

Even a simple basket of gourds looks more festive with a brightly-feathered rooster perched nearby.

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Bittersweet memories

Decorate for Thanksgiving with the fruits of the earth, but without bittersweet, please

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Not everyone has a handsome fowl to use as a centerpiece, but a proud rooster is my favorite prop for fall decorating. He is perfectly dressed for the season in bright feathers that compliment the colors of autumn.

This is a wonderful time of year for decorating. Nature provides everything we need in deep, rich colors. If nothing else, set out a bowl of mini-pumpkins and gourds, with or without a rooster. But don't stop there. We challenged some of the Garden Club's best floral designers to come up with a distinctive but easily-made arrangement for Thanksgiving. They were limited to natural materials found in the garden, woods or farmers market.

Kay Arnold, Fran Halloran and Sarah Wiltsee each made an arrangement with fresh ideas and out-of-the-ordinary materials. Unlike my basket of gourds, the designs these ladies came up with are creative. We hope you'll be inspired to try something similar, or make one that is uniquely your own. Start by filling your container with a well-soaked block of floral foam. Everything you stick in the foam will stay right where you put it.

While choosing your materials, keep in mind that one old favorite for fall decorating is now recognized as a threat to our woodlands and ranks high on the USDA Forest Service's list of Kentucky's most invasive plants. This is the beautiful but non-native oriental bittersweet. It is a woody perennial vine originally grown as an ornamental that has spread throughout the eastern United States. Its aggressive growth can smother trees, shrubs and other vegetation. There is a smaller native bittersweet that is not invasive, but it is difficult for anyone but an expert to distinguish between the two.

The red berries with yellow or orange husks are undoubtedly lovely, but they are widely dispersed by wildlife or by people who use the plants in floral arrangements. When the decorations are discarded in compost or brush piles, seeds are readily scattered. Introduced plants are out-competing our native species, resulting in a loss of diversity. As gardeners, we should all make an effort to eliminate invasive plants from our property and even from our flower arrangements. Artificial bittersweet is realistic and poses no threat. If you use the real thing, please dispose of it in the trash, not outdoors.



Photo by Sarah Wiltsee

Sarah Wiltsee suggests leaving the planting medium in outdoor containers when summer flowers die. Gather stems of seasonal greenery and dried material from your garden and stick them in the dirt. For this window box, she began with a background of nandina and cypress. She added yellowing hosta leaves, grass plumes, dried hydrangea blossoms and, for a touch of silver, stems of seeded eucalyptus. There's a small pumpkin in the back. It's easy to stick in new materials as these fade, and to add Christmas greenery later.



Photo by Susan Jonas

Oriental bittersweet, a favorite for autumn decorating, is now recognized as one of the most invasive plants in Kentucky. The vine can reach 100 feet in length and 7 inches in diameter, quickly smothering trees and bushes and out-competing native species. This vine has enveloped a large area of woodland in just a few years. Use artificial bittersweet in your arrangements or discard every berry in a plastic bag, not outdoors where wildlife can disperse the seeds.

I'm afraid I contributed to the problem for years, by decorating with bunches of oriental bittersweet on our front porch. I thought it was helpful when birds ate the berries. Ignorance can be dangerous to the environment. Now we know better.

There's another way to feed wildlife with your decorating discards. Don't throw away those pumpkins. Cut them in half and set them on the ground or hang them from trees. Pumpkin is irresistible to most birds and animals. Your dog may even take a bite.

Before you know it, we will be hanging evergreens and baking cookies for the Garden Club's holiday Green Tea on Dec. 6 at the Ephraim McDowell House.



Photo by David Seidel

An arrangement doesn't have to sit on a table. This distinctive floor design was made by Kay Arnold to greet guests in her foyer. Kay filled a black iron pot with 6-foot-tall English Ivy stems peeled from a tree in her yard. She attached small waxed gourds and added dried grass plumes, yucca leaves and sedums.