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# ***Making Wreaths***

**CLEMSON**  
EXTENSION

# Making Wreaths

Wreaths have been a favorite form of decoration ever since the ancient Greeks honored their heroes with crowns of laurel. More recently, we've adopted the wreath as a traditional symbol of welcome during the holidays, and increasingly, all year long. As the popularity of wreaths grows, so too does the interest in creating them. Many people are discovering the satisfaction of making wreaths of their own rather than buying them ready-made.

Although wreaths can be made from many different materials (including newspapers, oyster shells, and empty soda cans), this leaflet describes creating wreaths using natural plant materials, from cedar cones to magnolia leaves. Many of the wreaths discussed are everlasting—because they're made from dried or preserved materials rather than fresh, these wreaths will look attractive for years to come.

## Planning Your Wreath

If you plan to hang your wreath on the front door, as many people do, it's important to relate the diameter of the wreath to the size of the door because together, the two make up a single display. Just as a small, delicate wreath can look out of place hanging on a front door, a wreath that is too large will overwhelm even the grandest entryway. Making the wreath too big for the door is a common miscalculation.

One good rule of thumb is to hang a wreath at eye level, its center about one-fourth of the distance from the top to the bottom of the door and to keep the wreath's maximum width slightly less than one-half the width of the door. Keep in mind, however, that these calculations are only guidelines.

Texture of plant materials selected should also be related to the diameter of the wreath. A wreath will appear larger if bright colors, coarse textures, or reflecting materials are used. Smaller wreaths demand more finely textured materials. Both coarse and fine materials may be used on larger wreaths.

While fresh evergreen wreaths are short-lived if displayed on doors with a southern exposure, they may remain attractive for several weeks if displayed on doors with a northern exposure during cold weather. Of course, different types of foliage vary in their ability to remain fresh after they are cut.

## Materials

The attractive wreaths you'll see on the following pages were constructed using a just a few materials, chosen in part because they're easy to find, simple to use, and inexpensive.

Many of the natural materials called for—pine and cedar cones, corn shucks, rabbit tobacco, magnolia leaves, and fresh evergreens—can be found throughout the State, from rural roadsides to your own backyard.



*Some of the materials you'll need to make a wreath of your own include a wreath foundation—both straw and styrofoam are pictured here—wired wooden floral picks, pliers, white glue, greening pins, and 21-gauge wire.*

Once you've decided what type of material to use, you'll need a foundation for your wreath—the base to which you attach the foliage, cones, and decorations. The wreaths described here were constructed on styrofoam or straw foundations. These wreath frames are not as difficult to use—especially for the novice wreath-maker—as foundations made of wire or vine boughs. Both styrofoam and straw make it easy to attach foliage, cones, and ornaments with glue, wired wood picks, or greening pins.

In most cases, regular white glue is perfectly acceptable for fastening material to styrofoam wreath foundations: It's safe to use and turns clear when it dries. Some people prefer to use hot glue with a glue gun, but hot glue dries quickly, leaving little time for rearranging the material once it is applied to the foundation. Hot glue can also be dangerous to use. The glue often reaches temperatures as high as 300°, making it rather risky for a beginner.

Floral picks are tiny wooden stakes used to bind foliage into small clusters before attaching them to the foundation. Generally, picks come with flexible wire already attached, but the picks and wire can also be bought separately. Greening pins are sturdy, U-shaped tools used almost like staples to fasten heavy foliage to a foundation.

You can find wreath foundations, wooden picks, glue, and greening pins in craft stores, floral supply shops, and even some of the larger discount stores.



*Gathering greenery into clusters.*



*Using pins to fasten heavy greenery to a wreath foundation.*

## Methods

The first step to take in making your own wreath is attaching a loop of 21-gauge wire to the wreath foundation. You'll find it's much easier to take care of this task first, rather than waiting until your wreath is covered. Having the loop already in place will also make it possible to hang the wreath up periodically as you construct it to check your progress. Make sure the wire isn't visible from the front when the wreath is completed.

As you construct your wreath, keep the following pointers in mind:

- Removing the plastic wrap from a straw wreath foundation before inserting floral picks or greening pins allows them to go in more easily.
- Don't lose sight of where the top of your wreath is as you decorate; it will help you to place materials evenly.
- Work across the wreath foundation from the outside edge to the center as you attach materials, rather than in concentric circles all the way around the form. Your wreath will look fuller and more natural when you do.
- During construction, periodically hang the wreath up and stand back about 10 feet to look at it. If you're making a glued wreath, place it on the floor and view it by standing on a chair and looking down at it. You'll be amazed by what you can see at a distance that isn't apparent when the wreath is viewed at close range.

To assure a wreath is complete, place it on a table and look carefully at its edges. There should be no space between the plant material and the surface of the table. Often, the plant material in the center is not filled in all the way to the table surface. When this area is properly filled in, the wreath will have more depth and be more appealing.

## Cedar Rosette Wreath

Deodara cedar trees are common throughout South Carolina, and the cones needed for this wreath can be cut from the tree in the fall. You'll need a ladder to reach the decorative, woody female cones. The lower cones on the tree—and the ones more likely to be found on the ground nearby—are non-woody small, male cones, which remain fleshy until they disintegrate and are therefore not suitable for an everlasting wreath.



*Deodara cedar cone (female)*

The collected female cones must be dried in a warm location for 1 to 2 weeks before they are used. During drying, the cones will open and the middle scales will fall out. Save these scales for filling in any gaps on the wreath. Once the cones have dried, cut them into sections. You'll want just the tip of the cone—called a rosette because it looks like a rose in bloom—to make this wreath.

You'll need:

- 18" flat styrofoam wreath form
- 21-gauge wire for hanging
- At least 65 cedar cone rosettes (enough to fill 2 large paper grocery bags)
- Plenty of cedar scales—about half a grocery bag full—for filling in bare spots
- White all-purpose glue
- Bow

1. Glue the bases of the rosettes to the wreath form, keeping the wreath lying flat until the glue has dried. (This may take hours; it's often best to allow it to dry overnight.) White glue will hold the cones securely and become clear when dry.

2. Individual scales can then be glued to the center of each cluster to obscure the central cluster stalks and in between rosettes to fill in spots where the wreath form may be showing.

3. When you have finished attaching both rosettes and scales to the foundation—and the glue has completely dried—wire a bow to florist's picks and insert the picks carefully into the styrofoam.

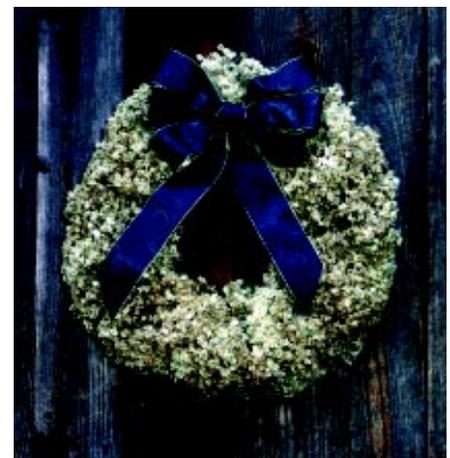
## Rabbit Tobacco Wreath

The weed rabbit tobacco—also known as narrow cudweed—is plentiful along rural roadsides and can be easily harvested in mid-October. By then, it is usually ready to use without any further drying.

This wreath has an unusual billowy appearance, a fine texture, and a distinctive scent.

You'll need:

- 18" straw wreath form
- 21-gauge wire for hanging
- Dried rabbit tobacco branches (You'll need enough clusters to make a full, well-rounded wreath.)
- Wired wooden floral picks
- Bow



1. Cut the branches into 4-inch lengths, and bunch several stalks together to form a cluster. Bind several 5-inch flowering stems with the wire on the florist's picks.
2. Attach these clusters to the wreath form by poking the wooden picks into the straw. Take care to position the clusters close together so the wreath foundation doesn't show through the flower clusters.
3. When you have finished filling in the wreath, you may want to give it a quick once-over with hair spray. This technique will subdue the rabbit tobacco's scent and greatly reduce the release of seeds as the weed dries further.
4. Attach a bow to the wreath by wiring the bow to a wooden pick and gently poking the pick into the wreath form.

## Magnolia Wreath



The glossy green leaves of the magnolia tree are a prized and popular material for holiday decorations throughout the year, especially here in the South. The leaves are available all year, and their size and sturdiness make magnolia leaves an excellent choice for attractive wreaths.

You can make a magnolia wreath that will last for years by preserving the leaves with a glycerine solution. Magnolia leaves change color when glycerized, an unusual effect that is well worth the trouble. Hues can range from a smoky green to a beautiful golden brown.

To glycerize the leaves, cut the magnolia branches into 18-inch lengths, and remove and discard the leaves on the bottom third of the cut branch. Smash the bottom of each branch with a hammer, and place the branches in a container holding a solution of two-thirds water, one-third glycerine—just as if you were placing cut flowers into a vase.

Within a couple of weeks, the leaves will turn color. You'll actually be able to see the progression of solution into the leaves. Keep a watchful eye on the process. Additional glycerine/water solution will have to be added to the container to replace the solution taken up by the branches.

You'll need:

- 18" straw wreath form
- 21-gauge wire for hanging
- At least 150 medium-sized green or glycerized magnolia leaves
- At least 150 wired wooden floral picks
- 6 gold glass ball tree ornaments, attached to wooden floral picks

1. Bind the stem of each magnolia leaf to a wooden floral pick with the attached wire.
2. Fasten the leaves to the wreath form by poking the wooden picks into the straw at an angle. Take care to position the tips of the leaves so that they point in the same direction, either clockwise or counter-clockwise around the form.
3. Hide the pick-ends of the leaves by placing the bottom, pick-end of each new leaf at least a half-inch underneath the previous one, creating a smooth, layered effect.

4. When you have attached enough leaves to cover the foundation, finish the wreath with gold ornaments. Simply poke the blunt end of a floral pick into the opening of each tree ornament ball and insert the point into the wreath, concealing each pick under a magnolia leaf so only the gold ball is visible.

## Corn Shuck Wreaths

Corn shucks, the leaves off an ear of corn, can be collected in corn fields in the fall. These are usually dry enough for immediate use. If you use shucks off corn purchased from the grocery store, you'll need to air-dry the leaves for several days before use.

When finished, this wreath will look natural and rustic, very suitable for autumn and Thanksgiving decorations.

You'll need:

- 18" straw wreath form
- 21-gauge wire for hanging
- At least four large grocery bags full of dried corn shucks. The leaves from ornamental corn vary in color, unlike those from Sweet Corn; a variety of colors makes a very attractive wreath.
- Wired wooden floral picks

1. Pick through the corn shucks you have, selecting only perfect leaves (those without rips or blemishes). Cut the leaves into pieces about 6 inches long.

2. Pinch the ends of each leaf together to form a loop at the top. Wire the ends to a florist's pick.

3. Poke the wooden picks into the straw foundation, placing them close enough together so that the wreath foundation does not show.

4. Be aware of the tints and shades of leaves you use as you work, making sure to distribute the various colors in an attractive pattern throughout the wreath.

Given the variety of natural shades and its unique texture, this wreath can look wonderful without any further decoration.



## Pine Cone Wreath

Pine cones can easily be collected from the ground in any pine forest or below pine trees in your own backyard. Mature cones that are small to medium in size work best. Large cones will not fit closely together, leaving spaces through which the wreath foundation can be seen.

For example, cones of Longleaf Pine and Eastern White Pine are too large and open. The Loblolly Pine produces cones that may be a bit long, but those of the Short Leaf Pine are about the right size and are common throughout South Carolina. Slash Pine and Spruce Pine cones, found along the coast, will work well for wreaths.

Virginia or Scrub Pine cones are excellent but very small, so you'll need to collect many of them to construct a wreath.

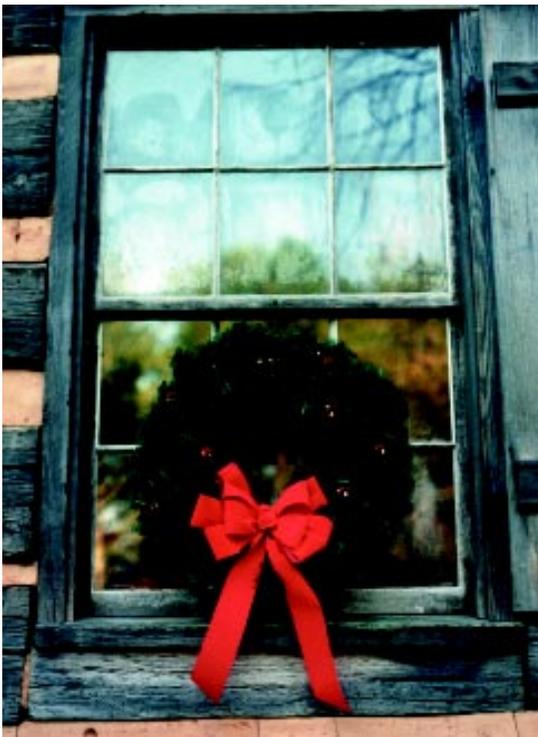
Depending on the type of decoration you choose, a pine cone wreath can look right for autumn or winter.



You'll need:

- 18" straw wreath form
- 21-gauge wire for hanging
- At least 130 small to medium-sized pine cones (Not too small, or you'll need plenty more; not too large, or you'll have trouble covering the wreath.)
- At least 130 wired wooden floral picks
- Bow

1. Attach each cone to a wooden pick by wrapping the wire around the center stalk about an inch from the stem end. Hide the wire by guiding it carefully between the scales of the cone and attach the end back to the pick.
2. Twist the pick until the two wires are twisted down into the pick.
3. Roll the pick onto the wire (into the cone) until it's tight.
4. Twist the pick until it points directly out of the cone.
5. Stick the picked cones into the wreath foundation, placing them close together so the straw form won't show through. Once a pick is in place, you may want to secure the cone more firmly by gently twisting it tighter on the wire.



## Evergreen Wreaths

Fresh evergreen foliage can be used to make beautiful wreaths—perhaps everyone's favorite wreath during the festive season. In South Carolina, evergreens such as cryptomerias, red cedar, and—along the coast—southern red cedar are abundantly available.

With their hardy green foliage, holly, hemlock, arbor-vitae, spruce, and rhododendrons can also make exquisite wreaths.

You'll need:

- 18" straw wreath form
- 21-gauge wire for hanging
- Enough greenery to create a full, lush wreath (The actual quantity will depend on the foliage you decide to use.)
- Greening pins or wired wooden picks
- Several yards of gold-colored cord, ribbon, or strung beads
- 8 gold ornaments (We've used pairs of tiny golden bells.)
- 8 wired wooden picks
- Bow

1) Cut evergreens into pieces 4 to 6 inches long. Bunch several pieces together and attach these clusters to the wreath foundation by wiring them to wooden picks or by fastening them with greening pins. If you've chosen a heavy type of foliage, like the cryptomerias cedar, you'll probably want to use greening pins—they tend to hold the heavier varieties more securely.

2) Fill the wreath in, taking care to hide the pick or pin end of each evergreen cluster by placing it an inch or so underneath the preceding piece.

3) When enough greenery has been attached to create a full, rounded wreath, wrap the gold cord, ribbon, or strung beads three-quarters of the way around the wreath, leaving the bottom quarter bare.

4) Fasten ornaments to wired wooden picks, place them in an even arrangement around the same three-quarters of the wreath.

5) Finally, cover the empty area at the bottom of your wreath with a large bow.

## A Handmade Bow—The Finishing Touch

No matter what size you want to make, the basic steps to creating a fail-safe handmade bow are the same.



1. Cut a length of ribbon slightly more than twice as long as the desired width of your bow (for overlapping ends). Bring the ends of the length of ribbon together and fasten with floral wire, forming a double loop.



2. Repeat this process twice more, creating three loops joined side-by-side with a single piece of floral wire. (You can add more loops, depending on how full a bow you want.)

3. Next, cut two lengths of ribbon to form the streamers of your bow. Pinching one end of each length, wire them to a wooden pick. Attach this section to a wreath foundation.



4. Make a center loop for your bow by wrapping a short piece of ribbon around the middle section. (For a plumper center loop, you may want to stuff a wadded piece of plastic wrap or paper under this piece of ribbon). Secure the ends of the center loop behind the bow with wire. Attach the bow to a wooden pick for insertion into the wreath foundation over the streamers.



### For More Information

*Great American Wreaths*, by Martha Stewart, Oxmoor House, 1996.

*The Holiday Wreath Book*, by Eric Carlson, Lark Books, 1994.

*The Ultimate Wreath Book: Hundreds of Beautiful Wreaths to Make from Natural Materials*, by Ellen Spector Platt, Rodale Press, 1995.

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