

Lamorinda

OUR HOMES

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Lamorinda Home Sales

... read on Page D2

Digging Deep with Goddess Gardener, Cynthia Brian

Botanical Brilliance: Yuletide's natural jewels

By Cynthia Brian



Photos Cynthia Brian

The red berries on a holly hedge begin to appear.

"Nature always wears the colors of the spirit." ~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. Everywhere we go, lights are twinkling, Christmas trees are glistening in windows and parks, and gigantic shiny balls are hanging on front yard trees. Holiday cheer permeates the air as we hum carols and children pine for the jolly white-bearded man in the red suit to land his flying reindeer on their rooftop soon.

The most miraculous part of this festive season is how the landscape lights up with lots of colorful berries, bushes, and cones that we can use to decorate naturally. For the first time in



Pyracantha berries are loved by the birds and beautiful in arrangements.

years, my Christmas cactus is blooming in December! In the past, it bloomed at very odd times. The cascading stems and beautiful blooms create cheerful table displays. The vibrant tubular flowers arrive in shades of red, pink, and white. I'm thrilled that my pink Christmas cactus is finally on schedule.

Pine, fir, redwood, spruce, and other conifers retain their needles throughout winter. I use this time of year to do my pruning so that the cut boughs may be added to my mantels, counters, and front porch as wreaths and garlands. A big bonus is that these evergreens add that nostalgic Christmas aroma throughout the

house. I also collect pinecones and magnolia cones to incorporate into my displays. The red seeds of the magnolia cones add a touch of elegance to holiday decorations. All the cones can be left natural for a rustic and sophisticated look, or they can be spray painted to match any style. Pyracantha, cotoneaster, holly, and Chinese pistache berries are then plucked from the bushes and trees to be tucked into the branches as pops of color. Pyracantha berries are orangey-red, cotoneaster berries are a brilliant red, and Chinese pistache berries boast a deep pink to crimson hue with shades of blue. Holly is a classic Christmas plant renowned for its sharp, pointed, glossy green leaves and vibrant red berries. Adorn with shimmering lights and the yuletide symphony begins!

What about mistletoe, you ask? Doesn't everyone want to kiss under the mistletoe? Mistletoe is a parasitic plant with green leaves and white berries that are poisonous to humans and some animals. Globally, there are 1,300 species spread by the sticky seed from the berry either attaching to a bird or other mammal or consumed by them. The Anglo-Saxons witnessed that mistletoe grew where birds left their droppings. In Anglo-Saxon, "mistel" means "dung" and "tan" means "twig", thus the name mistletoe means "dung-on-a-twig." Not as romantic as most of us thought! For several years baskets of mistletoe flourished on my beautiful cottonwood tree until these "witches' brooms" killed my host tree and it had to be removed. From that day forward I kissed the mistletoe goodbye!

Pomegranates and persimmons offer a departure from traditional holiday decorating, infusing a touch of nature beauty and symbolism into arrangements. The deep red color of pomegranates is associated with the merry spirit of Christmas.

... continued on Page OH6