

The wreath masterclass

The foliage adorning your front door is as vital a part of a traditional Christmas as the turkey and mother-in-law. If the bog-standard holly, laurel or ivy number isn't for you, get creative, nurture your inner artist and make your own beautiful wreath, festooned with edible ingredients →

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MEET THE WREATH-MAKER

For the past 16 years, Jan Billington has been cultivating edible flowers at Maddocks Farm Organics near Cullompton in Devon. Now she's using her art college training and the plants on her five-acre farm to create beautiful wreaths, some made using garlands of kitchen herbs, others festooned with eye-catching curly kale and cabbage roses.

"Essentially, the idea came from my stomach," explains Jan. "We love to eat everything we grow here at Maddocks Farm and Christmas is a time of feasting,

too, so it's nice to make wreaths that are a part of that. You sometimes see them made with chillies or apples, but they still use a base of boring – and inedible – holly and ivy. I thought it would be fun to use edible stuff like herbs for the background as well as for the decoration."

"The first edible wreath I made was a herb one for a friend who was unwell," Jan says. "It's a wonderful thing to hang in the kitchen – it smells divine, and you can pluck the herbs from it when you need them. I also made wreaths at Christmas as a way to thank regular customers. After a while, others started asking me to make them, so the business took off."

So what are the best edible adornments to gather together? "Use rosemary as edible tinsel, and for baubles try sprouts, onions and garlic heads," she says. "Seed heads are stunning, too – try allium, poppy or even sunflower heads. I source many of my 'ingredients' from my garden, then supplement them with whatever catches my eye in the local greengrocers and farm shops. We make our bases from hay from a local organic farm. It's woven around a wire frame, so the wreaths smell sweet from the start. When Christmas is over, the hay goes on the compost heap, and you can re-use the wire base the following year. Once you start experimenting, you'll be amazed at how many edible leaves, fruit and vegetables there are that look great on a wreath."



JAN'S PRINCIPLES OF WREATH-MAKING

Give it a theme "We theme our wreaths around traditional Christmas dinner courses, so we do one using sage, red onions and garlic bulbs (see p52) and a Christmas pudding wreath (right) decorated with dried orange, dried figs from the garden and cinnamon sticks. We make one just out of winter brassicas and another from root vegetables, and we also do small herb wreaths that people can hang in their kitchens over Christmas or use as a centrepiece on the dining table."

Make it personal "If I'm making a wreath for a friend who's passionate about shooting, for example, I might include pheasant feathers and blown duck eggs."

Find the right finishing touches "The bow you choose can make or ruin a wreath. Pick a colour that emphasises the colours of the ingredients. If you want a natural look, use raffia. Think big and bold – it needs to stand out."

HOW LONG WILL A HOMEMADE WREATH LAST?

"It depends on a range of factors, such as the weather and which ingredients you've used, but if your wreath is out on the front door and it's cold, it should easily last a week or more. If you're hanging a herbal wreath in the kitchen, avoid anywhere near the oven or hob, as steam could make the leaves go mouldy (don't spray it with water as this can have the same effect)."

WHERE DO I GET THE KIT?

What you need is simple: a wire frame, florist's wire, stub wire and a glue gun. You may be able to buy these at your local florist's; if not, try hobbycraft.co.uk (and pet shops for hay). You can also buy a kit from Jan, which includes a wire base, hay, florist's and stub wire, and instructions. Kits cost from £38 plus postage, and the wire frame/base can be re-used. Then forage for (or buy) your greenery and decorations (see above for what to look out for).

HOW EDIBLE IS YOUR WREATH?

While the ingredients of your wreath may be edible, use common sense in deciding whether or not to actually eat them. "Some ingredients – such as fir and bay leaves that you might use on the base – are edible when cooked but not when raw," says Jan. "Obviously, the ingredients will deteriorate with time and the wires could rust so, in this case, feast on your wreath with your eyes rather than actually tucking into the ingredients with the turkey and trimmings."

make it festive.

INGREDIENTS IN THE ROUND
Jan Billington's Christmas
pudding wreath, adorned
with cinnamon sticks, orange
slices, rosemary and bay



Turn the page for a step-by-step guide to making an edible wreath →

make it festive.

Step-by-step to the best wreath

Creating a one-of-a-kind seasonal decoration is simple with a bit of time and Jan's expert guide



1 Assemble your kit (see previous page), then gather greenery for the base. For herb wreaths, use rosemary, thyme, sage, lavender or bay; for larger wreaths, add in plants such as kale.



2 Edible berries, fruits and variegated sage add great colour. (Note: it's best not to eat rose hips raw.) Use anything from crab apples to figs, cabbage roses and dried orange slices.



3 Twist one end of a reel of florist's wire onto the frame to secure. Wind it around the frame, packing in hay as you go and pulling it taut to hold the hay in place. Secure wire to frame, then cut.



4 Attach a loop of florist's wire to use for hanging the wreath. Tie your greenery into sprigs with wire, wrapping it around the stems, then attach securely to the wreath using more wire.



5 Work around the wreath, covering the previous sprig's wire and stems with the foliage of the next. Create a wreath of dense greenery by pointing some sprigs inwards, others outwards.



6 Make 'baubles' by attaching items such as garlic and seed heads to stub wires with a glue gun. Poke them into the wreath and wind tight to secure. Finish with a raffia or ribbon bow.

• Jan makes bespoke wreaths to order (from £60 for a 10in kitchen herbal wreath), but you need to be local to the farm in Devon as you'll have to pick up your wreath. For more information, visit maddocksfarmorganics.co.uk