



Head outdoors for holiday decorating inspiration

By: Alexandra McKay, Morven Park Events Coordinator

My grandfather was a magnificent gardener. He had an arbor that dripped with wisteria, under which I would enjoy delicious summer snacks and lemonade. His expansive vegetable garden and orchard ensured my grandmother was very busy during canning and jamming season. I have many fond memories of time spent there and often visited when I needed a quiet space to pause and reflect on some pressing issue. Consequently, I love gardens, not only because they remind me of my childhood and calm my senses, but also because I envy the talent of gardeners.

Lately I've been trying to figure out how I will decorate for the holidays, ruminating over which place settings to choose, and debating what colors I'll use for the tree. It was during a recent walk through the formal gardens here at Morven Park that I found all the inspiration I needed! Once again, the work of a talented gardener was going to help me solve a problem and ease my concerns over the decorating decisions that have to be made before the onset of the holiday season.

Magnolia Leaves and Boxwoods

Morven Park's gardens are known for two things—our giant magnolia trees and remarkable boxwoods. I suggest decorating with either this holiday season. They're both traditional and rustic at the same time. I think Southerners have been using magnolia leaves to decorate since the discovery of magnolia trees. If you are a true Virginian, you are going to use boxwoods instead. Both can serve as wonderful alternatives for your wreath as the customary pine branches can be unruly and less chic.

You can also run groupings of magnolia leaves down the center of your dinner table, but remember to flip the leaves in order to show both the green side and soft golden side. The golden side looks best with gold chargers, while the green side will look best with your great grandmother's silver. If you have both, you will have a delightful excuse to mix your metals in a very modern way. Have some leftover boxwood clippings? Use them to fill your Jefferson and Julep cups and place the cups around your house or line them up on your mantel, interwoven with your holiday cards.



The author's 2018 holiday table.

Iron Gates

Anyone who has taken a Morven Park tour with me knows my favorite spot on the property—the iron gates at the bottom of the brick staircase near the Corbell building. As I enjoyed my recent stroll through the gardens, I found myself staring at the gates and admiring the artistry of the curves of the metal and how it resembled the curves of beautiful handwriting. Then it hit me—to add a bit of “Iron Gate” inspiration to your holiday home décor, try including a little handwriting.

Obviously, there are a few ways to do this. Place cards and menu cards always provide a charming touch and are extremely helpful to the shy guest or foodie at your holiday table. If your personality or home décor is more minimalist or modern, you can also use a pen designed for glass to write classic holiday song lyrics on your front mirror or picture frame

glass. Use your most art nouveau handwriting and your finished product will be something worthy of all your guests' Instagram pages.

I have spent the last few years playing with my handwriting (and pens) and have learned that if you just add a swish, or use a calligraphy pen, everyone will think it's fancier than it actually is. If you truly don't like your handwriting, a printed font will be fine. Check out Dafont.com for inspiration.

Planters

I have a friend whose pet peeve is people who drop flowers straight from the plastic sleeve into a vase without trimming the ends, feeding, or arranging the flowers. Ok, that "friend" is actually me, and I am equally displeased by people who simply plop a poinsettia pot—wrapped in utilitarian plastic reminiscent of a 1970's gold lamé dress—in the middle of their dining room table.

Nothing is more beautiful than a live plant centerpiece on a holiday table, but you need to take a few minutes to stage it properly. To end the horrible faux pas of an unembellished poinsettia, wander your house and find a bowl, vase, basket, or silver bucket that is bigger than the pot your plant came in...that is now your "planter." The next trick is to upgrade the lackluster planter by filling in the gaps surrounding the poinsettia pot with smaller items. I recommend using any extra ornaments or, if you are a better gardener than me, you can add mini trees, paperwhites, and moss if you so please. If you've visited Morven Park in the summer, you've seen that we use a similar trick to make large barrel planters look full by including seasonal flowers of various shapes and size.

Simply keep in mind that holiday decorating doesn't have to be done only with items from a store. If you find yourself at a loss, take a moment and step outside. Perhaps you will find exactly what you are looking for. I hope that you'll make a special visit to the Park and stroll through the formal gardens from which I've drawn so much inspiration. Look at the planters and stop by the wrought iron gates to see it all for yourself. If you visit in December, be sure to enjoy one of our Holiday Tours [MorvenPark.org/Tours] so that you can see the marvelously decorated Davis Mansion and maybe draw further inspiration from ornaments and centerpieces of the past.

A final word: While I recommend visiting the Park's formal gardens and using natural items for your holiday decorating, please DO NOT gather your items from the Park! Thank you!

