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christmas decorations from the garden

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It's easy to make Christmas decorations and with just a little work they can look more beautiful than anything you can buy. My favourite way to make easy Christmas decorations is to go out into the garden, collect from a wood or harvest from the hedgerow.

You'll save yourself a fortune - and, what's more, it is ultra-fashionable. Craft is all the rage and air (or even road) miles are to be avoided, while foraging for organic material to transform into glamorous decorations is the last word in chic.

But what you don't want to end up with is a large, dried flower-and-grass arrangement, reminiscent of a pub fireplace in summer. To keep the glamour factor high, the less you mix things up the better. Arrange each seed pod, vegetable, or fruit on its own, in an identical group or in pairs. Avoid having a mix of lots of different things - too itchy-bitsy and lacking in style.

Garden seed heads

Among my favourite garden-harvested Christmas decorations are allium seed heads that have been sprayed crimson or silver. Their structure is complex yet simple: a ray of narrow stems, each ending in a flower and seed head. This combination creates a good silhouette.

The football-sized [Allium schubertii](#) are the best. You can store these from one year to the next - the paint makes them less fragile - and there is no better star for the top of your tree. Also try the slightly smaller varieties, [A. cristophii](#) and 'Purple Sensation'. If your alliums are already shot, go looking for agapanthus to spray. They work just as well.

Bell-shaped [opium poppy](#) seed heads are also ideal. Spray-paint them and link one with another into a long ribbon chain to hang over mantelpieces, around doors and down the length of your table.

When spraying anything, wear gloves, ensure good ventilation and use acres of newspaper. If you forget (as I did) and your fingers get covered in silver, clean them with a mix of two tablespoons of sugar, one tablespoon of lemon juice and one of olive oil. Forget soap - this home-made remedy gets almost anything off your hands.

* Watch Sarah's video, '[What to do with your allium seedheads](#)' for more ideas.

Globe artichokes

Weighty, chunky [globe artichokes](#) are ideal for spray-painting. The paint highlights every wrinkle and ridge and makes them look as if they've been cast in silver. You'll want to pick them up and weigh them in your hand to see if they're real.

If possible, buy your artichokes when they're still around in the summer and autumn or, better still, pick them from your garden. Cardoon flower buds will work just as well.

Both should be harvested before they get too blown apart by wind and rain. It doesn't matter if they're going brown - you'll cover them with spray - but make sure they are not too ragged. Cut them with a length of stem and a leaf or two.

The leaves add a good twist and turn, and provide contrast to the chunky stem. Try to find artichokes or flower



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buds in different shapes and sizes as this will give your final arrangement more interesting forms and outlines.

Once picked, leave them somewhere airy and cool (not in a damp shed), so they dry out rather than going mouldy. They can be sprayed after a few days. The best colour for artichokes is definitely silver.

Scatter them over your Christmas table, or along the length of a mantelpiece or window ledge, or arrange them in a large bowl interspersed with brilliant coloured Christmas baubles.

Silver beans

I think Tiffany's, the jeweller, used to make a solid silver runner-bean paperweight that looked wonderful. But why not create similarly striking Christmas decorations for a fraction of the price? Spraying runner beans with silver paint highlights the bulge of the beans and the lovely curve to the tip of the pod.

Scatter over any flat surface, or thread on to ribbon or wire and stretch across the room as an alternative to paper chains.

Chinese lantern chains

For colour, think of growing and collecting brilliant orange Chinese lanterns to combine with fuchsia-pink spindle berries, picked from the hedgerow. Bright pink and orange are one of my favourite colour combinations and these foraged seed pods work well together threaded in a chain.

Segment the Chinese lantern stems so that you have one lantern and a bit of stem in each. Then thread these sections on to a length of reel wire. As the stems are almost hollow, this is easy to do. Leave a gap between each lantern and wire the spindle into these. Then brighten and tidy the whole thing by winding ribbon along the length of the chain.

** Watch Sarah use Chinese lanterns in [a beautiful Autumn wreath](#) on our YouTube channel.*

Cranberry and quail egg chains

The deep rich crimson of cranberry chains is very Christmassy - and they last for more than a week. Aiming right through the middle of the berry, thread the cranberries like beads on to 45cm (18in) lengths of reel wire. Leave a bit of spare wire at each end and then join as many lengths together as you need.

I also love ribbons studded with quail's eggs. You need to blow the eggs, so wash and dry them and then make a little hole with a needle in the pointed end and an even smaller hole in the other.

Hold them gently with your thumb and forefinger and carefully blow out the contents. If this doesn't happen easily, enlarge the hole in the pointed end and try again.

Once they've been blown, rinse them thoroughly in a bowl with bleach or vinegar to stop any pong, and then bake them in the oven for 15 minutes at 100C/212F/gas mark ¼.

This hardens and dries the shells. Using a large darning needle, thread the eggs with crimson ribbon. Finally, to add sparkle, twist bright green beaded wire down the entire length of the chain and drape them around your Christmas tree.

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