

Decorate a Holiday Candle Log with Garden Trimmings

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Our gardens are dying back for the winter but there are still materials out there that we can use to make unique, fresh holiday decorations for our tables and mantelpieces. One of my favorites is a candle log--draped with greenery, flowers and seasonal accents, it can be customized for any holiday or the days between.

Basic Supplies and Equipment:

- Piece of fresh tree branch, 2"+ diameter and 18" or so in length
- Fresh greenery, fresh or dried flowers, pine cones, seed pods and other natural materials
- Drill with 3/4" bit
- Light-weight florist wire
- Pair of tapers, any color that you like
- *Optional:* candle holder inserts, available in craft stores, and rubber mallet

You can make the base of your candle log well ahead of time and reuse it for years. Start by finding a tree branch that is not yet decomposing. If you are lucky enough to have a river birch, now is the time to prune it. Otherwise, you may find one in a new wood pile at your neighbors' house or local nursery.

Cut the branch to your preferred length, trimming the ends on a diagonal. Set it on a table. If it rolls, nail tongue depressors or wood slats to the underside to support it. Mark the positions for your candles. Before you drill the holes, decide on the depth that you want them and mark the drill bit with tape at that level. If you have purchased candle holder inserts, use them to gauge the depth and, once you have drilled the holes, pound them into place with your rubber mallet. You now have a candle log base that you can use and re-use many times.

You can decorate your log with hardy greenery that will last for several years--preserving it by placing it in glycerin and water for two weeks (for instructions, see <http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/plants/other/seasonal/hgic1753.html>). Alternatively, you can make it fresh a day or so in advance of a holiday party. In either case, stroll around your landscape and see what you can find. Then, if you like, you can supplement it with greenery and flowers from your local florist, manufactured materials from a craft store, and accents from your own collection.

For example, the candle log in the photo is a one-sided fall-transitional decoration that the author constructed with a birch log purloined fifteen years ago from a stack of firewood on a relative's property in Maine, fresh prunings of China Girl holly and a dried hydrangea from her garden, seed pods from the roadsides of Frederick County and shiny, plastic raspberry accents.

Once you have assembled your materials and visualized your basic design, start building a base of greenery, experimenting with draping it in various combinations over the log. When you like the look, trim the springs and wire them together. Attach them with a second piece of wire around the log in a place where it will be masked by the greenery. Add flowers and other decorations, wiring or simply setting them in place. Continue until you feel that your candle log is finished. Celebrate your creation!

The possible variations are infinite. Consider the following:

- Use driftwood, though it tends to be very hard to drill, so you will have to start with small holes and then enlarge them gradually.
- Finish your creation with a hand-made bow (see <http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/plants/other/seasonal/hgic1753.html>).
- Add a figurine like a wood elf or Santa Claus.
- For the winter holidays, spray your finished log with snow.

Ruth H. Axelrod is a Maryland Master Gardener, living in Frederick, who delights in making holiday decorations for her home, family and friends.

For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit www.frederick.umd.edu/mg or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, (301) 600-1596.

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