

THE HOLLY AND THE MISLETOE

By Eben E. Rexford

THE use of the holly and the mistletoe on Christmas and other holidays, is almost universal in countries where they are to be gathered. They are prized because of their beauty of foliage and fruit, and because of the associations which cluster about them, handed down from ages ago. We have inherited a love for them from our English ancestors, and the sales of them are large each year in the principal American cities. In a few localities not far from the Atlantic coast, from Delaware to Massachusetts, the holly grows in small quantities, but our chief supply comes from across the ocean. For holly, which is not intended to be too elaborate, nothing can be finer than these two plants. It is not the purpose of this article to suggest designs for their arrangement; simply to give a few hints regarding their selection, leaving each individual to follow out designs and plans of his or her own.

THE USE OF GROWING PLANTS

GROWING plants are used more and more each season in Christmas decoration of churches. Palms are most effective with their broad, rich, shining foliage; the ficus, with its broad leaf and erect stalk, is sure to be admired. Ferns are not only very beautiful in themselves, but large species lend themselves readily to the production of fine effects in massing, by filling in between larger plants. Rex begonias, with their great leaves, showing most beautiful and grotesque variations in green, brown, white and many metallic colors, produce a very fine effect among ferns, but they must be handled with the greatest care, as they are easily injured. Coleus plants, of highly colored varieties, are very effective because of their vivid contrast with all shades of green; lilies show most beautifully when given a setting of ferns; white and other light-colored flowers show most effectively at night. When large growing plants cannot be obtained, young evergreens can be used. Fasten them to such supports as are given a Christmas tree. Among these which should be of different sizes to avoid formality and in Chronotone effect, blooming plants can be placed. If evergreens are to be used, and it is possible to procure them, I would urge the selection of young hemlocks; their slender, arching branches are much more graceful than any of the spruce. But where it is possible to procure other greenery for the group behind the chancel or altar, I would advise keeping evergreens in the background, and using holly and mistletoe as festoons and the decorations of columns and arches.

FESTOONS IN THE HOME

IN decorating the parlor, I would never advise the use of festoons. Few rooms in private houses are large or high, ceilinged enough to admit of this style of decoration. Arrange your green against the walls, about doors, windows, and backs of pictures, and have a cluster of mistletoe and holly in the center piece to the room. Such an arrangement is simple, but most effective, because most artistic. In order to judge of the effect of any decoration, think of it as a picture, and test it as such. Look at it closely, and ask yourself if it would please you were it set in a frame to hang upon the wall of your room. If it stands this test you may be sure you are on the right track. If you feel that it would look stiff, prim or formal, it is mistaken. Always attempt to carry out your idea, but decide on something less elaborate, always looking at your work as part of a picture, and forcing it to stand the test as such. Remember that a parlor will not admit of the same style of decoration as a church, because the two places are widely different. What is appropriate in one would be out of place in the other. Those who cannot afford to buy holly and mistletoe for decorations must make native evergreen act as a substitute; many varieties are admirably suited for this purpose. I much prefer the hemlock, cedar and pine to the spruce, because of their more graceful habit. The spruce is prim, rigid and conventional, and it is difficult to make it conform to any plan where graceful curves are desired. Its most useful field is that of the background; there it is perhaps better than any of the other evergreens named, because it can be fastened to lie flat against any surface. For festoons, cedar is excellent, as it has such close foliage that a little of it effectively conceals the rope upon which it is fastened. Always use a rope, as the weight of a long festoon is considerable, and a very stout string often break under it. I find the fine, strong wire used by florists in bouquet work much better for fastening the branches to the rope than strings. It is more manageable, and never shows.

If there happen to be any mirrors in the rooms they may be decorated with long festoons of evergreens studded with holly leaves. The mantel-pieces may also be effectively draped with foliage arranged as long trails, which may be allowed to hang loose, being attached to the support at the top. Where cut flowers are to be obtained, they add greatly to the beauty of house decoration; they should be arranged by dainty hands, and should be grouped as artistically as possible.

WHEAT, OATS AND RYE

IN home decoration for Christmas, a beautiful result is obtained by using heads of wheat, oats or rye, and various grasses, which have been treated to a bath in which alum has been dissolved. Many of my readers are familiar with "crystallizing" these productions; there is no "knack" about it. Simply dissolve alum in soft water until the solution is so full of it that a drop shows a tendency to crystallize readily when allowed to cool. Tie the wheat, grass or whatever you wish to crystallize, in little bunches. Remove the solution (which should be kept warm until you are ready to use it), from the above, and suspend the grasses, etc., in it. Hang the bunches across a stick, or prevent them, in some other way, from resting on the bottom of the vessel containing the solution, as this would give them an unnatural shape. As soon as you see a tendency to crystallization, remove them from the bath, and hang them up head downward, shaking them as little as possible. A little experience is necessary to make one proficient in this branch of the business, but the requisite knowledge is easily acquired, if one is careful. The object is to coat the grasses, or whatever else is used, with crystals of alum, which will sparkle and glisten like atoms of frost. The solution must contain enough alum to give a good deposit of crystals on cooling. If enough is not used, the coating will be light, consequently a failure. When dry, the wheat heads, or heads of rye, oats or grass, will be so heavy with the deposit of alum that they will bend gracefully, and can be arranged in many beautiful ways among the branches of evergreen. Beautiful leaves can be formed by them, if they are used in combinations with berries or cones. A fine effect is produced on evergreens by sprinkling them with maclure into which powdered mica is afterward sifted. The effect is like that of hoar-frost, and is very pleasing under lamplight.

DECORATIONS FOR THE CHURCH

IF the ceiling of the church is high in its center, arching in from all sides, festoons can be used effectively, but they should never be low enough to take away the idea of height and breadth. Let them start from some point at least half the height of the side walls and meet at our central center; the old chandelier used to be the central point for the meeting of these decorations, but the use of electric lights has relegated this to the past. A charming effect can be produced by covering the place where the strands meet with a broad mass of branches, through which the electric bulb can flash its brightness like a star. In churches where there is no dome, or where the arches do not converge toward a central point, I would advise the use of long festoons or wreaths. Let there be short ones from arch to arch, instead; always have a festoon start from and terminate in a cluster of boughs. One of the faults found with our native evergreens is their dull, unrelieved color. It is because of the contrast of rich green and glowing red and scarlet that the holly and mistletoe are so much more highly prized, perhaps. It is unnecessary to go outside of those two plants for contrast. When decorating a church it is always well to keep the decorations as conservative as possible, that they may not offend the older members of the congregation, who are apt to take offense at any innovations in such matters.

BITS OF BRIGHT COLOR

BUT in order to secure relief for the somber effect of cedar, pine or hemlock, we must use something that will furnish a decided bit of bright color. This is found in our native alders, with their spikes of brilliant red; in the mountain ash, with its grape-like clusters of orange-red fruit; in the littersweet, with its flower-like seed; and the sumach, with its crimson masses of velvet-covered berries. Used against a background of dark evergreen, these seem to gather greater brilliancy, and make a vivid point of color that is as effective as it is beautiful. Last season I suggested the use of cones of the pine, larch, and Norway spruce. I find that many churches, acting on this idea, were highly pleased with the result. In many instances, large branches of pine were used, with cones adhering. These were bronzed and the effect was very pleasing. The material used for bronzing them was the same as that used by artists in painting. When for finishing radiators, heating pipes, etc. It consists of a liquid, "vehicle," in which a bronze powder is mixed. This powder comes in several shades. You can have gold, silver or copper as desired, and also green, steel-blue and other metallic colors. These can be used singly or in combination. When used together, they give a fine contrast and afford a pleasing relief to each other. It is cheaper to use this kind of bronzing than the kind put up in small bottles for use on fancy articles, as quite a quantity would be required in a large church. Full directions for mixing can be procured of the dealer. It is very easily applied, it dries rapidly, hanging for a few days finely against the low tone of the background of evergreen foliage by daylight, and is especially effective at night. At intervals of a few days the berries can be introduced, if desired, to heighten the effect and relieve the mass of all sombreness, but I think the effect is most pleasing where the berries and the bronzed cones are kept apart.

BRANCHES FOR COLUMNS

LONG, slender branches can be used effectively at the top of columns, if the base of them is given a firm support; dispose them in as natural a position as possible. Let them follow the spring of an arch, and take the place of a festoon. Indeed, in most instances, it will be found that the use of branches is much preferable to festoons or wreaths, because the latter are artificial and unnatural in their arrangement. Nature never festoons anything but vines; to attempt to make evergreen branches assume the appearance of a vine is to make them take part in a burlesque. Therefore, I think you will find it more satisfactory to use a branch as a branch, than to make it try to fill a part for which it was never intended. To arrange festoons gracefully and produce artistic results, is a very difficult matter, and I would advise other forms of decoration as much more likely to give satisfaction, especially in small churches.

There are some evergreen vines which can be procured in almost all country places, and many florists have them for sale; these are from one to two yards in length. They can be stated together with fine wire and used to wreath about pillars. If allowed to droop from arches, they give a graceful effect. Nothing gives greater pleasure as an ornament for the altar than the holly, and in churches it will be found that the amount can be expended in its purchase, I would advise restricting its use to the altar. The rail of the chancel can be wreathed with the evergreen vine of which I have spoken. Or ivy can be made very effective here. Quite often you will find plants growing in pots; these can be borrowed or hired, and the vines trained over the chancel in such a manner as to make it the most beautiful feature of all. If one could procure evergreen ivy to wreath pillars, chancel and windows, what a fine effect it would give! Few plants are more readily to decorative effects, because of graceful habit of growth. If it could be obtained in sufficient quantities, I would prefer it to either holly or mistletoe. For home decoration it is unequalled. Trained about the doorways, over windows, back of mirrors and across the ceiling, it is the ideal vine.

SOME MINOR DETAILS

IN decorating home or church, be sure not to attempt more than you can well accomplish. In simple schemes of decoration, wrought out in detail, will please, while an elaborate one, poorly executed, will be very unsatisfactory to all who have an eye for the beautiful. In decorating a church, let one person or a committee have charge of the plan, and leave it wholly to them to decide on the treatment. Let them lay out the work for others to complete, and never interfere with them by suggesting changes of any kind, unless you see they are making a mistake, and you know they would certainly avoid were their attention called to it. Such mistakes are frequently made by persons who have supervision of the matter, because they overlook some of the minor details. The persons who are working from their plans discover the mistake, and they should at once notify the person or committee having charge of the matter. So if suggestions are all welcome from anyone, but, unless such cases occur, do not have anything to do with the work these persons have been appointed to perform, even if you know the result will not be pleasing if carried out on the terms they decide on. Hints and suggestions from parties outside the committee, when volunteered, always hinder more than they help. If a committee is wise, however, they will consult with others who have good taste and judgment regarding these matters, and avail itself of all really good suggestions.

THE CHRISTMAS TABLE

MUCH careful thought and attention should be given to the home table on Christmas Day, as a happy arrangement of greens, or plateau of flowers, will be found to give the needed touch that makes the Christmas dinner the bright and cheery meal it should be. When greens are used for decoration, a large branch of mistletoe is effectively placed over the chandelier, and a basket of holly, with its berries, in the center of the table. English mistletoe is preferable to the American, both on account of its rich coloring and the larger size of the berries. Place several sprays of either holly or mistletoe about the table, tying the larger ones with scarlet ribbon. If other greens are used, try to carry out the same suggestion, adding to them above the chandelier branches of the brilliant hued sumach, placing a mass of bitersweet in the center of the table, and sprays of carnations here and there on the cloth. The result will prove to you that even without the holly and the mistletoe your table may be daintily and effectively decorated. Sometimes ferns alone are used; sometimes ferns with lilies of the valley. When both ferns and flowers are desired, the former is more effective on or above the chandelier, the flowers placed in the center of the table. A pretty addition would be the placing of a small bit of holly, with its berries, tied with tiny scarlet ribbon, at each person's place. One could add little appropriate Christmas mottoes to these, if desired. The flowers used may be either orchids, roses, Roman hyacinths, violets or lilies of the valley. Try the use of carnations, or a few detached roses, if such are used as a center piece, may be carelessly thrown here and there about the table (having an eye always to effect). When very elaborate decoration is attempted, fine fernery, foliage, placed at intervals about the table, are seemingly caught together with a few roses, violets or lilies of the valley, in small bunches. The various colored berries can be introduced, if desired, to heighten the effect and relieve the mass of all sombreness, but I think the effect is most pleasing where the berries and the bronzed cones are kept apart.

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