

THE HOLLY AND THE MISTLETOE

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 a prominent feature 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 all 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 home decoration, 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 management, 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 very effective in their broad, rich, shining foliage; the figs, with its broad leaf and sweet stalk, is sure to be admired. Ferns are not only very beautiful in themselves, but large specimens 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 variegations in green, brown, white and many metallic colors, produce a very fine effect among ferns. The palms are easily injured, 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, such as hemlocks, are to be preferred, as supports are given a Christmas tree. Among these—which should be of different sizes to avoid formality and a monotonous 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 spruces. But where it is possible to procure other greenery, such as pine, around the chancel or altar, I would advise keeping evergreens in the background or restricting the use of them to festoons and the decorations of columns and arches.

FESTOONS IN THE HOME

TIN 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 beds of pictures, and have a cluster of them in a corner, or a 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. You feel that it would look well, but, in forming a picture, you must endeavor 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 evergreens, such as hemlock, etc., 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 others, but it is not so good. It can be made 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 very stout strings 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 bunches of holly. The mantel-pieces may also be effectively draped with foliage arranged as long trails, which may be allowed to hang loose, but must 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. Dissolve alum in soft water until the solution is so full that it will not dissolve any more, then strain it through a cloth, and allow it to crystallize rapidly when allowed to cool. Then 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 stove, 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 cause the bunches to become soggy, 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 diamonds. If the solution does not contain enough alum it will give a bad 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 letters can be formed of them; they can be used as candlesticks, and the like. A fine cone effect is produced on evergreens by sprinkling them with mica, and then powdered mica is afterward sifted. The effect is that of a heavy hoar-frost, and is very pleasing under lamplight.

DECORATIONS FOR THE CHURCH

IF the ceiling of the church is high in its center, arching 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 aisle, and meet at one common 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 choir, or where the arches do not converge toward the center, let others to complete, and never interfere with them by suggesting changes of any kind, unless you see they are making a mistake which you know they would certainly avoid were their attention called to it. Such mistakes are frequently made by persons who have supervision of these matters, because they overlook some of the minor details. The persons who are working on these decorations should be allowed to do so, and should not once interfere with them, and they should be once relieved of the responsibility of the matter. So far, suggestions are allowable from anyone, but, unless such case 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 lines they decide on. Hints and suggestions from parties outside the committee, while valuable, are but a hindrance more than they help. If a committee is small, however, it will consult with others who have good taste and judgment regarding these matters, and avail itself of all really good suggestions.

BITS OF BRIGHT COLOR

BUT in order to secure relief for the somber effect of evergreen pine or spruce, we must have 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 bittersweet, 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 effective and beautiful. Last summer I suggested the use of a spray of pine, larch, and Norway spruce. I find that many churches, acting on this idea, were highly pleased with the results. 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 hardware dealers and plumbers for finishing pipes, hardware, 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 produced by bottles for painting, and 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, having a lustre that shows finely against the low tone of the background of evergreen foliage by daylight, and is especially effective at night. Artificial bright-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.

BRANCHES FOR COLUMNS

LONG slender branches can be used effectively at the top of column, 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. They often suggest anything but vines, to attempt to make them assume the appearance of a vine is to make them take part in a fusillade. 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 as 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 fastened 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 where but a small 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 can find old plants of it 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 enough ivy to completely cover a chancel and windows, what a fine effect it would yield! Few plants are more beautiful, and none lend themselves 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. A simple scheme of decoration, well 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 decide on the style, let others to complete, and never interfere with them by suggesting changes of any kind, unless you see they are making a mistake which you know they would certainly avoid were their attention called to it. Such mistakes are frequently made by persons who have supervision of these matters, because they overlook some of the minor details. The persons who are working on these decorations should be allowed to do so, and should not once interfere with them, and they should be once relieved of the responsibility of the matter. So far, suggestions are allowable from anyone, but, unless such case 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 lines they decide on. Hints and suggestions from parties outside the committee, while valuable, are but a hindrance more than they help. If a committee is small, however, it will consult with others who have good taste and judgment regarding these matters, and avail itself of all really good suggestions.

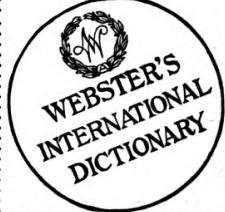
THE CHRISTMAS TABLE

MUCH careful thought and attention should be given 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 arranged 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 richer 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 idea of the 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.

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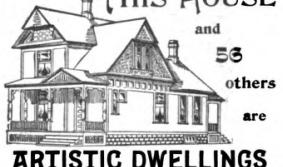
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