

Mother Nature a great source for tablesettings

It's almost here again, that time of year when we crave warm and wonderful starchy food: when we think about entertaining, apple pies, turning leaves, and cooling temperatures.

For me, autumn goes hand in hand with entertaining, and with that comes the planning of the dinner table.

For me, it's not just about the food, although admittedly that's a big part of it too. It's about bringing the outside indoors. It is kind of like capturing that last bit of nature before winter sets in and forces us to spend more time indoors.

The following materials from nature and your farmer's market or grocer's produce section can be used in a variety of ways:

- Pumpkins and gourds — A variety of sizes and colors pumpkins are great in groupings as centerpieces or to greet guests at the front door. The Cinderella pumpkin has been popular recently and looks great when arranged with smaller "orange" pumpkins. Look for colors of warm white, sage green, butternut and, of course, the classic orange colored pumpkin. Orange can be overpowering so keep this variety to a minimum for a softer scheme.

- Sheaves of wheat — These make an earthy statement. Most quality floral and gift stores carry them this time of year, and they range from \$35 for a small bundle to \$85 for a large one.

- Persimmons — If you're lucky enough to have a tree, clear glass bowls of persimmons are perfect for sideboards and dressers. Add their leaves to the arrangements or use only the fruit.

- Manzanita — Some people think of manzanita as a weed but I love it. The smaller variety is especially nice for large basket arrangements. Cut plenty when doing manzanita arrangements, about the size of a small 10-foot tree. This usually enough to fill 2 to 3 baskets. You will usually have some waste since parts of the bush aren't usable.

- Small pumpkins — Hallowed-out little pumpkins in orange and variegated colors make great votive candle holders. Sweet touches for the Thanksgiving table.

- Nandina (Heavenly bamboo) —



Courtesy photo / Shiree Hanson Segerstrom

Greenery and pumpkins bring a touch of the outdoors to a well-set table.



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This is my go-to greenery. It has a ton of color and texture in the fall, just when you need it the most. It's almost always healthy looking and works perfectly in oversized arrangements. (See photo).

- Corn and husks — Are perfect for swags. I love to use them on my front door, but they also look terrific filling "horns of plenty." They add a real autumn flavor, but because they are colorless and dry, they work best alongside other materials.

- Pomegranates — Are a personal favorite. They are beautiful and dramatic filling tall glass cylinders or in arrangements down the center of the table.

- Cotoneaster — Is so wonderful with its textured branches, soft variegated green leaves and bright red berries. It's dramatic as well as rustic in tall arrangements.

- Olive branches — Have a classic, rustic, understated charm and take me back to the south of France. They are beautiful in wreaths and tall floral arrangements, alone or with other greenery. I prefer them in arrangements without flowers.

- Magnolia — Magnolia isn't just for Christmas, the underside of its leaves are a beautiful russet color. They are perfect for swags, garlands, and wreaths. Magnolia greenery is avail-

able year round and is most beautiful on its own, without other greenery. Their creamy white blossoms have a citrusy scent.

Note: all woody branches must have their ends hammered, otherwise they can't absorb water. Use "frogs" if need be, to construct your arrangement.

Planning your table (any time of year) can be broken down into five "steps":

- 1) Tablecloths, napkins, and rings
- 2) Place settings (charger, plates, flatware, stemware, place cards)
- 3) Centerpieces
- 4) Candles
- 5) Serving pieces

Ideally, centerpieces should be below eye level for dinner table conversation. To add height to your table, clear glass, ceramic or silver candelabras won't block your view the way a floral arrangement would. Instead of putting tall floral arrangements on the dining table, place them on your side table or buffet. Low centerpieces tend to be visually boring, so use interesting material. Try it with a variety of pumpkins and gourds, in a variety of sizes. Start from the center and work your way out, tapering the arrangement at the ends. Fill in here and there with smaller pumpkins. For a table of eight, purchase three medium-sized pumpkins, seven medium-small and nine small. Think about the pumpkin sizes in terms of how they relate to one another.

Don't be shy about using your good table linens, preferably those in

shades of taupe, white, tan or cognac. Use solid fabrics or subtle patterns so your food and guests won't be overpowered.

I love the look of chargers, and the metallic gold ones are gorgeous in the fall. Don't be shy about mixing formal with informal elements such as heavy woven chargers and fine white linens like I did for the Channel 10 Sacramento News feature last fall with Darla Givens and Kate Larson (see photos). The contrasts keep things interesting. You can also line the chargers with colorful fall leaves. Place them on the charger in an artful way, then top with the dinner plate. If the leaves are dry or brittle, you can gently brush them with a little olive oil and a pastry brush.

I love to personalize my napkin rings or place-card holders. One year I did my place cards from miniature gift cards I'd purchased at my design store. Another year I placed little gold place card "crowns" inside deep red, vintage sherbet glasses. When it was time for dessert, we simply set them aside.

Simple, warm-white plates are classic and elegant. So is quality China. Mix and match dinner plates and salad plates for visual interest, and experiment to find what works with your style of entertaining.

Candles — Tapers and votive candles bring warmth to both formal and informal dinner parties and should be unscented for such occasions. Scented candles alter the taste of food. Choose candle holders to go well with your décor. Oversized, clear glass lanterns are popular right now, and are versatile enough to go well with a wide variety of styles.

Serving pieces — Don't be afraid to pull out the wedding platters, whether they're china, ceramic or crystal. If you don't have serving pieces, invest in clean white ceramic platters with simple designs or white china with a gold rim. These never go out of style.

Whether your entertaining style is formal, casual, dramatic or understated, decorations from nature are adaptable and stylish. While seasonal, store-bought products can be tacky and contrived. Mother Nature is always a class act.