



Wreath revolution

Traditional is not always best when it comes to Christmas flowers

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A lightweight base is the starting point for Hans' simple yet stylish door wreath



Hans likes to push the boundaries with his floral arrangements

It's easy to get bound up in tradition when it comes to Christmas flowers, reaching for the tried and tested dark red chrysanthemums, holly, ivy and the inevitable scarlet poinsettia. Yet in one small Cotswold village a Dutchman is orchestrating a floral revolution.

Florist Hans Haverkamp is used to multi-coloured festivities: "In the rest of Europe you get Christmas decorations in different colours. Schemes in England are always red and gold."

He advocates taking the traditional and giving it a twist: instead of red, think burgundy; for gold, choose burnished copper or apricot; swap white for cream."

"If you just go only slightly away from those tones and those colours, it looks so much nicer."

At Christmas, it's very difficult to do things that are outside people's comfort zone,

Changing attitudes is not always easy: "At Christmas, it's very difficult to do things that are outside people's comfort zone," he admits.

But with his workshops gaining in popularity, it appears to be a battle he is winning.

Despite the obvious connection between a Dutchman and flowers, it was a career that Hans, who moved to Twyning in Gloucestershire as a young boy, fell into almost by accident. He started by studying Interior Landscaping in North Wales.

"It was landscape architecture for indoors, big shopping centres and Centre Parcs. As a career opportunity it was totally useless."

What he did discover was a love of design and flowers but decided against pure landscape architecture.

"I liked the idea of designing and creating, not just coming up with the idea but putting it together."

Instead, Hans headed back to Holland and a diploma in floristry, following that with a Master Florist course, a demanding part-time course that saw around 60 per cent of the students drop out before the end.

What it taught him was to constantly challenge the norm, to push floristry beyond the usual boundaries and how to carry out those ideas.



Chunky candlestick arrangements can be used along a table or to light up corners

“Anybody can come up with a great idea but you need to know how to put it together.”

It also introduced him to using materials other than flowers and getting away from what he describes as “sticking flowers in a bit of foam”.

There followed a varied career that has seen him teaching in Japan and the north of England, organising an annual flower festival in Barbados, demonstrating in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and running a flower shop in Berkshire with Andrew Lloyd Weber among the clients - he counts his son’s wedding as one of his notable commissions. In addition, he won awards for innovation and creativity at the World Flower Arranging Show, and gold and best in show at Chelsea in 2007. Next year he is creative director of Winchester Cathedral’s flower festival and talks excitedly about arrangements made from onion husks and the possibility of a flower- covered rice curtain across the cathedral’s screen.

Today, although his work is more subdued than his student pieces, it has an appealing freshness and originality.

Traditional is not entirely set aside though and his Christmas designs are based on the familiar: door wreaths, table arrangements, chunky garlands and Advent wreaths.

Underpinning all of them is texture, which is even more important at Christmas



PHOTO: Rich Ellery

Texture is a vital ingredient in Hans’ designs

when green is a dominant colour.

“If you go for lots of textures it will give you a really good start.”

He likes to combine spikey spruce with glossy ivy, the feathery foliage of conifer, soft moss, holly, both variegated and plain, and glaucous eucalyptus. Twigs and bark add another layer of texture.

“Get a nice mix of materials and try to get a slight difference in the tints and tones of the greens you are using.”

Top of his must-have list is berried ivy as it can be bunched to form a cluster and skimmia is another favourite, as it provides foliage, flowers and berries. What he will never use is mistletoe.

“If you try to stick it in with other things, you will lose it and it looks a mess.”

For individual arrangements, much of this can be culled from the garden although Hans, who uses 120 bundles of spruce alone for his workshops, has to buy in much of his material.

This foliage provides the bedrock for many arrangements. The garland, which can be hung over doors, wound around staircases or draped across a mantelpiece, uses a rope to give it flexibility. The wreaths are made using a straw-filled ring - lighter than the traditional moss rings.

Covering the base is vital and Hans begins by making a hook at the back and then dividing his greenery into three sizes, using the biggest for the outside of the ring, the medium on the top and smaller pieces on the inside. Each is fastened by wrapping wire around and care is taken to hide cut stems beneath the next piece of foliage.

With door wreaths, impact is all important as they are usually seen from a distance and Hans groups different things in big clumps.

“If they are all muddled up, all you see is this fuzzy-looking ring shape; the bigger, the better.”

What you should do is avoid too much symmetry - impossible unless you measure everything - and not worry too much about the result.



Using cream instead of white gives a low table arrangement a more contemporary feel

“At the end of the day, it does not have to be perfect. As long as you’re happy, that’s the most important thing.”

For an Advent ring, he often keeps it more simple still, combining blue spruce with cushions of bun moss and round, white candles rather than the more usual taper candles.

“It’s a traditional Advent ring but it gives it a slightly different look.”

The rings and garland can either be left as straightforward foliage or added to with Christmas baubles, pine cones, berries or dried fruit, giving another layer of texture and even colour.

In the past, Hans has used tiny cinnamon stick bundles, stars made from willow and coconut, conkers and star anise - which can be glued together or stuck into oranges.

Flowers can also be added, including creamy roses, cymbidium orchids, lilies, pale peach carnations or pin cushion proteus.

“They are not Christmas flowers at all but they give a slightly fresh look.”

Amaryllis are another favourite, not only for their wide range of colours from white through to deep red, but also because they last well, making them cost effective despite the high price per stem. Hans suggests three stems, combined with a

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little seasonal greenery in a simple vase with moss tucked into the top to give a natural feel.

A long, low table arrangement combines cream roses with dark foliage and round candles, fixed in place with three lengths of florist’s wire. The secret here is to make sure both ends are the same length and to arrange all the material so that the stems lead to a central point.

Meanwhile, different lengths of silver birch form a backdrop for three white hyacinths, a bed of moss, with ivy adding a festive touch.

He sources many of the extras that characterise his arrangements from Holland, visiting the huge flower market in Aalsmeer a couple of times a year; the lime green and purple baubles that will form part of this year’s work were bought there earlier this year. It’s there that he

finds foot-long cinnamon sticks that can be used to form a fence-like backdrop to a vase arrangement and it’s from Holland that he buys flowers unseen in British flower shops.

“Florists stock things that are easy and that they know will sell.”

It is, he believes, the fear of the unknown that makes us afraid to experiment with things such as the Eucharist lily, which looks like a white daffodil and sells at around £3 a stem.

“It will last two weeks but if people don’t have that information or that experience, they are not going to buy it.”

It is this willingness to try something new that Hans tries to instil in those who attend the workshops, which are also an experiment for him as he trials none of the pieces beforehand.

“I don’t go and make something in advance as it has to be a bit of excitement for me as well.” ■

Hans will be running Christmas workshops on door wreaths, a festive flower arrangement and Christmas table design at the Ann Townend Hall in Twyning, near Tewkesbury on various dates on December 10-23. Prices start at £40. For details and to book, call 07818 040312, or visit www.hansflowers.co.uk