

## Homemakers Treated To An Array of Holiday Decorating Ideas

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Lebanon County homemakers were treated to a bountiful array of holiday decorating ideas at the annual Christmas holiday program sponsored by the Lebanon County Extension office.

Mrs. Paul Behler, an accredited flower show judge and an instructor in flower arranging and handicrafts, presented a series of decorating "vignettes" which were designed to coordinate home decorating around a central theme.

She said it is her opinion that a "few well made decorations are better than a lot of clutter without a common denominator." She said she has spent years making decorations out of household discards, but decided to study the origins of some decorations and make things which are tied together in some way. While she described the traditions, she also gave much practical advice on successful, simplified holiday decorating.

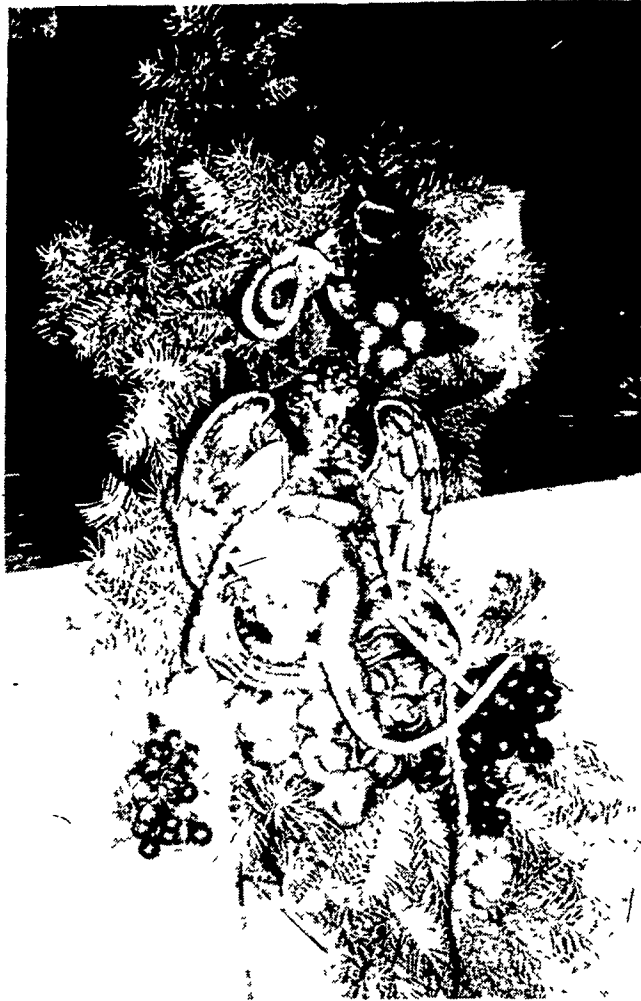
She told the homemakers that each of our principal decorations - the wreath, the swag and the garland - have meaning from ancient times. The wreath, for instance, is the Christian symbol of eternity - there is no beginning and no end. Evergreens were used in medieval times in dark hallways to keep away evil spirits and sickness. They are also the Christian symbol of everlasting light.

In her first grouping she chose to feature the ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia, held from December 17-24. This was the Roman new year, according to Mrs. Behler, and the Romans celebrated by decorating their homes, temples and public buildings. She also chose a celestial being as her "common denominator" for the group.

A door swag, she said, is the first "statement" about how your home will be decorated. In her Saturnalia door swag, she used spruce and a plump angel. She said the Hebrews pictured angels as being beautiful young men, but in late Christian art they were depicted as plump young children. She also used a rose as a continuity factor in her Saturnalia group.

As the basis for any door hanging, Mrs. Behler used a coat hanger made long by simply holding the hook and pulling. She said then the greens are tied in place, but to keep them from slipping, the hanger should be covered with aluminum foil. She added, "Everybody has too much to do at the last minute," so suggested that the women make the swags now and keep them outside until it's time to use them. She said she hides her door decorations under the bushes and "just wipes off the snow" when she's ready to use them.

To keep the greens looking lovely as long as possible, she suggests conditioning them in a solution of one teaspoon of fertilizer to one gallon of water. She said the



Bacchus, the spirit of revelry, inspired this centerpiece.

greens can be kept outside in a bucket in this solution, and "it doesn't matter if the water freezes."

For ivy or holly leaves that are to be used as individual leaves, she says you should simply submerge them in water.

In making a kissing ball for her first group, Mrs. Behler reminded the group that the use of mistletoe was practiced by the ancient Druids to ward off sickness and evil.

Since the festival of Christmas is not just a religious holiday today, but also one of "merriment, gift-giving and entertaining", Mrs. Behler used Bacchus, the spirit of revelry and wine, as the inspiration for a centerpiece in the Saturnalia group. A large wine bottle was placed in styrofoam on an appropriate support, and was then surrounded with greens, grapes and ivy, with roses used for continuity. Angels were also used to carry through the theme. The use of roses is significant because they are the "symbol of Messianic promise and eternal love", Mrs. Behler said.

Victorian was the next mood for which Mrs. Behler decorated. She said the Victorian mood was "romantic and modesty was a requirement, whether real or affected". It was also an era in which "the air was clean and sex was dirty", according to Mrs. Behler.

Her common denominator for this vignette was the dove, which she said has long been the symbol of peace. She also said that the gesture of raising two fingers in a peace symbol is not something invented by the young generation, but one which was used anciently. She added that the Christian religion has always considered the dove important, having it represent the Christ as a young man and saying that the cooing of the doves "soothed the Babe in the manger".

In her Victorian motif, Mrs. Behler attached an elegant pencil and pad to her door swag for messages. She also included a nosegay with a royal blue ribbon and a dove.

In preparing an appropriate centerpiece, she used a Victorian-type white column and bowl, and added a candle and Victorian cord. "Candles," she said, "represent the solidarity of the home and the light of the world." She said the custom of lighting candles comes from the Jewish holiday of Hannukkah, "the festival of the lights".

In Mrs. Behler's opinion, there should always be some decorating done especially for children. She had made a

very interesting wire sculpture of Rudolph which would have delighted any child. She told how the people of Holland, when they migrated to the New World, brought with them their concept of Saint Nicholas, and how, over the years "we corrupted it to be our Santa Claus." Of course, she said, "we also put him in the North Pole and soon had him jumping down chimneys." To her wire sculpture of Rudolph she added greens, bells, holly and candles.

Another decoration designed to please the children was a part of her vignette featuring straw, which Mrs. Behler said is a predominant decorating material in Europe. She explained that in Poland, particularly, shocks of grain are used in the four corners of the dining area at Christmas time. Children are sent outside to watch for the first star and when it appears Christmas dinner is begun. Also, pallets of straw are provided for the children to sleep on as part of the Christmas celebration.

To work with straw, Mrs. Behler cautions that it must be made wet for several days to be pliable. She also advised that straw wreaths can be obtained in flower shops - they are the ones used by funeral homes, with the plastic covering removed. In her Polish wreath of straw, she placed a fresh, small shock of grain, a star created from straw and a cornhusk doll.

For the children, she told the story of the "Jule Nisser", a Christmas elf who lives in attics and barns with the mice. The legend is that the Jule Nisser will do good deeds at Christmas, and if you feed him porridge he will sweep and clean your house at Christmas, of course, in the morning the porridge will be gone. To convey the message of these good elves, Mrs. Behler created a centerpiece, beginning with a basket to which she added styrofoam and attached a small red lantern. She added balsam, mushrooms - the bright variety with red tops, mice and fascinating little elves. These decorations can either be bought or created yourself, Mrs. Behler said.

In her early American grouping, she created a door swag out of hardware cloth to which greens, nuts, cones and bells had been added. A large red bow and an old fashioned slate and chalk for messages made the swag complete.

She also created bread dough figures which she displayed on an oven board. These figures can be made from 4 cups flour, 1 cup salt and 1½ cups water. This should be kneaded about four minutes and when the figures are complete, baked in a 350 degree oven for one hour. The dough must be rolled between the palms of the hand to create the little people. After they are baked, the figures should be shelled.

Mrs. Behler said it is also important to include the "smells of Christmas" in decorating. She made pomander balls and fagots of rosemary, arranging them in a basket. She told the women that legend has it that there was a



Mrs. Paul Behler tells about the origins of Christmas Customs.



Mrs. Paul Behler discusses how to make a colorful swag for a table decoration.

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