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# Horticulture

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## OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

*Cooperstown, New York, gets all dressed up for the season*

The historic village of Cooperstown, New York, transforms magically in December, housing possibly the most remarkable holiday decorations in the country. The Clark family started this tradition of village beautification in the early 1950s. The simple act of sharing their family greenhouse's poinsettias with the village churches evolved into the elaborate program which lives on today.

The decorations are anything but typical. They aim to restore the dignity of the season by elevating and celebrating nature. The

designs are a reflection on the quietness of a sleeping garden; the frosted tree branch that stands tall, gently grazing an icicle-adorned roofline.

By mid-December, all the Clark-affiliated organizations—from hospitals to gyms—are bejeweled with ornaments from nature. Mike Bouton, principal horticulturist for the Clark Greenhouse, heads this seasonal transformation. He humbly calls his work “eclectic”. Influenced by the architecture of each building, Bouton and his staff

create wreaths and garlands, while filling containers with cut greens and dried floral and seed materials. Acorns, chestnuts, fruits, and pods of all types are gilded in gold and affixed in patterns evocative of something as simple as a swirl in a seashell or as complex as Renaissance triptych.

The spirit of decoration has worked its way into the fabric of the village. Local art associations sponsor wreath contests and residents are invited to adopt a village lamp-post for adornment. Gary Barnum of The-

atrum Botanicum “brings great skills, insights, and passion to the mysterious process of enchantment” to the private homes in the town. He strives to capture that moment of magic when the passage of time, paired with an aspect or object of nature, takes on a disguise and elevates itself to a feeling of beauty.

Inspired by the ancient forests of childhood, Barnum and his partners, Tony Costanzo and Tim Gill, combine botanical materials, English turn-of-the-century bells, and handworked metal structures. The three men gravitate toward antique objects as they “connect to the past and create a sense of depth. Everything else derives from the landscape . . . the materials are allowed to express dignity, revealing the real quality of the holidays and honoring the season.” To stroll the village streets looking at Theatrum Botanicum’s work alongside that of the Clark Foundation on a short, solemn, grey day works magic for the spirit—paying proper homage to the winter season and the sleeping garden. —*Roanne Gregory is the co-owner of Nature Contained, a garden design company based in Boston.*

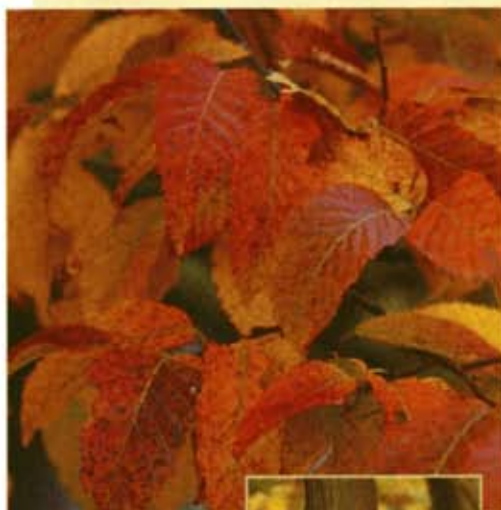
## NATIVE AMERICANS

### Musclewood (*Carpinus caroliniana*)

Certain plants almost cry out to be touched. The tickly softness of a bed of damp moss or the unshaven roughness of a beech’s bark draw the hand just as a bright spot of color draws the eye. *Carpinus caroliniana* is just such a plant. Known, colorfully, as musclewood, American hornbeam, or blue beech, it is a 10- to 15-foot-tall understory

tree with limbs like sinuous or cabled quality of well muscled arms straining to carry the weight of a leafy canopy. Covered in smooth, elephant-gray bark, it is a tree that feels cool, strong, and confident. Whether in the woods or in the garden, it is one I will not be without.

Musclewood is native to wet woodlands and bottomlands east of the Rockies throughout the United States and southern Canada. Like many wetland plants, though, it grows very well in dry and sunny situations in the less competitive environment of the garden. It is difficult to distinguish young musclewoods from beech or birch; its saw-toothed, oval leaves quite resemble theirs. The young leaves often have a copperish or pinkish tinge to them before they mature to a medium green. Fall foliage is one of musclewood’s best features—in fact, it is one of the few trees in my woods that colors well even in shade. The leaves turn a copperish pink, orange, or yellow before falling. As they are beginning to turn, you may notice dangling



- Saw-toothed, oval leaves turn copperish-pink, orange, or yellow in autumn.
- Grows well in light shade or sun and moist soil
- Bark is smooth and gray
- Hardy in USDA Zones 4–9

clusters of green or yellow winged seeds arrayed like paper lanterns from every branch tip. These hang on until shattered by winter’s chill.

The trunks begin to develop their distinctive buttressed or cabled appearance when only about an inch in diameter. They usually reach a girth of about six to eight inches before succumbing to the vagaries of life in the understory, upon which they are replaced by vigorous new sprouts from the tree’s base. In the shade, branches tend to fan out horizontally in search of the light, developing a wide, somewhat flat-topped shape that is the perfect counterpoint to the vertical form of overstory trees. As its name implies, musclewood is a tough and adaptable small tree, winter hardy in USDA Zones 4–9.—*William Cullina*

## Local Event

DECEMBER 13

### Candlelight Evening

The Farmer’s Museum,

Cooperstown, NY

607-547-1450

[www.farmersmuseum.org](http://www.farmersmuseum.org)

Caroling around a bonfire and enjoying tasty treats make the perfect end to a day spent touring Cooperstown’s holiday display. The Farmer’s Museum takes on a magical appearance this evening, decorated in greenery and illuminated by hundreds of candles and lamplight. The event runs from 3:00 to 7:00 p.m.; admittance is \$11 for adults, \$5 for children ages 7-12. Children 6 and under and New York State Historical Association members get in for free.