

Carve a portion of good cheer with pineapple centerpiece

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Pineapples have long been a symbol of hospitality, representing the warm welcome, affection and good cheer of a gracious hostess. In colonial times the exotic pineapple, native to Brazil and Paraguay but imported to our shores from the Caribbean, was so rare and expensive it could be rented by the day to top mounds of food on a party table. Only the very wealthy, however, could afford to eat the luscious fruit.

Thankfully, some things have changed. Cultivation of more than 14 million tons of pineapple each year, coupled with modern methods of transportation and preservation, now make the fruit both affordable and easy to obtain. In the past, I've often used a pineapple as holiday decoration on the mantle or newel post, or carved it into a boat to fill with cream cheese and fruit dip. But this year, thanks to Sandy Raymond (a creative Master Gardener living in Lexington, South Carolina), I've added a new skill to my bag of pineapple tricks.

At a November program for a group of gardeners in the Midlands, Sandy demonstrated how to create a holiday centerpiece by carving a pineapple with "windows" to make a candle holder. Lucky for me, a mutual friend knew I would be interested in making a similar decoration and emailed me Sandy's directions. While planning the Thanksgiving dinner that Tim and I would share with Andrew and Danielle, our first son and his wife, and Daniel and Cori, our second son and his girlfriend, I hatched a plan. Instead of creating the centerpiece ahead of time, I would make the event a family project, inviting our gang to make two pineapple displays while I worked on the feast.

While Tim and Andrew stayed glued to a televised football game, Danielle, Cori, and Daniel joined me in the kitchen. In no time at all, they whipped up two fabulous arrangements, one for each end of the table. Later, when the candles were lit and we gathered at the table, the centerpieces were even more beautiful than expected. Best of all, I have a special memory of Thanksgiving and our brief time together.

Supplies and Directions

- Paper and scissors (to make template)
- Straight pins
- Sharpie, or other marking pen
- Carving knife
- Pineapple
- Cookie or cake tray
- Oasis soaked in water, or similar wet floral foam
- Florist tape
- Florist picks
- Three (or more) types of evergreen cuttings

Daniel, our resident engineer, devised a simple method to create the "windows" of the carved pineapple. Sandy's directions dictated two windows, but we decided three would give a glimpse of the candle from every seat at the table. Measuring the height and circumference of the pineapple, Daniel decided the windows should be about four inches tall and three inches wide. Whatever number or size windows you choose, be sure to leave about two inches of pineapple between the carved spaces to provide adequate support for the top. Folding pieces of paper in half, make symmetrical gothic-shaped window templates, then space them evenly around the pineapple, pinning them in place and tracing with a Sharpie to mark the surface of the fruit. Remove the templates and use a sharp knife, cutting toward the center of the pineapple, to carve the windows and lift chunks of fruit that can be reserved and eaten later. (Or, as in our case, as we went along.) Trim the inside of the pineapple as need to remove excess pulp and to make a flat base for the candle. Cut a block of Oasis in half and secure it to the tray with florist tape. Put the pineapple on top of the Oasis, pushing it into the soft foam until it is perfectly upright, and then pin it into place with picks. Use different types of evergreens to create a decorative base under the pineapple, pushing the foliage into the sides of the wet Oasis. I choose evergreens by the "rule of three"—one with a waxy coating (such as magnolia), one with a non-leaf shape (such as cryptomeria), and one with a different color (such as variegated holly-leaf osmanthus). Other types of foliage can be added if you like.

For a different look, forego the greenery and trim the bottom of the pineapple to stand upright on an footed cake stand. Then, surround the pineapple with small fruits and nuts, perhaps even arranging grapes to cascade over the edge of the cake plate. Finally, place a vanilla-scented votive inside the pineapple. When lit, the fragrance of spice and fruit will make your mouth water, adding to the pleasure of good food and fine company.

Merry Christmas!