

PRESERVED MAGNOLIA WREATH

(Magnolia Grandiflora 'Little Gem')

for the

Farmer Florist



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EXTENSION

Little Gem Magnolia has broad consumer appeal due to its association with the American South. Its glossy leaves are enhanced by the color change from deep green to burnished leather during the glycerin preservation process.

Learn to produce Little Gem, preserve it using vegetable glycerin, and form it into a classical wreath shape for a product that will appeal to consumers, retail florists, and wholesale floral suppliers. Customers may want to display this wreath as an interior design accent over the fireplace mantel or on a wall.

PRODUCTION

The 'Little Gem' cultivar of Southern Magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*) has a compact, upright growth habit more typical of a multi-stemmed shrub than a single-trunked tree. It grows at a slow rate to a height of perhaps 30 to 35 feet with an 8- to 12-foot spread and flowers at 2 or 3 years old. Little Gem Magnolia forms a dense, dark-green, oval or pyramidal shape, making it suitable for screen or hedge planting.

If moist soils are available, Little Gem Magnolia will thrive in full sun and hot conditions once established. If irrigation cannot be provided periodically, plants located in partial shade for several years after planting seem to grow better.

Trees can be very drought-tolerant when grown in areas with plenty of soil for root expansion. However, Little Gem exhibits only moderate drought tolerance in restricted-soil areas or in areas with poor, dry soil. Southern Magnolia prefers acid soil but will tolerate a slightly basic, even wet or clay soil. The most common form of propagation is by cuttings.

Scales of various types will infest twigs and leaves. Magnolia scale is the most common scale and can be a half-inch across. You can control overwintering scales with horticultural oil. Trees appear to grow well even with heavy infestations, although they can be unsightly.

HARVEST AND HANDLING

Harvest magnolia stems from 8 to 24 inches long. Look for branches with plenty of leaves and remove any flowers. You can keep fresh magnolia fruit (cones) on the stems; they will hold in place as they take up the solution. Magnolia should be harvested after new growth has matured. Soft, springtime growth cannot adequately take up the glycerin preservative solution and will appear wilted.

Before placing magnolia stems in solution, remove any foliage that falls below the water line. Bacteria introduced from the leaves' surfaces can grow in the liquid, making it cloudy and hindering its uptake. The remaining, clean solution can be reused several times.

The next step is to place freshly cut magnolia stems in the glycerin solution. The foliage used in the example here was preserved in a half glycerin, half tap water solution, but optimal results may be found using a one-third glycerin solution. It is best to test different concentrations to find what works best for your operation. An odorless, colorless liquid, vegetable glycerin is used as a sweetener and moisturizer in various food and cosmetic products.

A potential problem with glycerin-preserved foliage is that absorbed solution can weep from the leaves when they are displayed under humid conditions. Glycerin droplets can leave stains on doors, walls, and floors. It is a good idea to add a disclaimer to any product using glycerin-preserved foliage or flowers warning consumers to keep these products indoors and out of humid locations.

Our studies have found that it takes about 2 weeks for the foliage to turn a uniform brown color. At this point, remove stems from the solution and rinse off excess glycerin and any dew on leaves into a sink. Shake off the excess water, pat dry, then air dry in a space with plenty of air circulation for a day or so. For more information, see [MSU Extension Publication 3039 Glycerin-Preserved Foliage](#).

DESIGN CONSTRUCTION

Once the magnolia is prepared, prune stems to approximately 14-inch lengths. It takes about 1.5 pounds of these stems to produce one wreath. The wreath here was made on a 14-inch-diameter frame, and the finished design has a 22-inch outside diameter. It takes about 30 minutes to construct with a clamping-type wreath machine.

The wreath frame has wire prongs that hold loose bunches of plant material. The machine uses force to clamp the prongs around a cluster of about four to six stems, holding them tightly in place. The clamping action is operated by a foot pedal, leaving your hands free to hold materials in place. Having the clamp mechanism permanently attached to a table

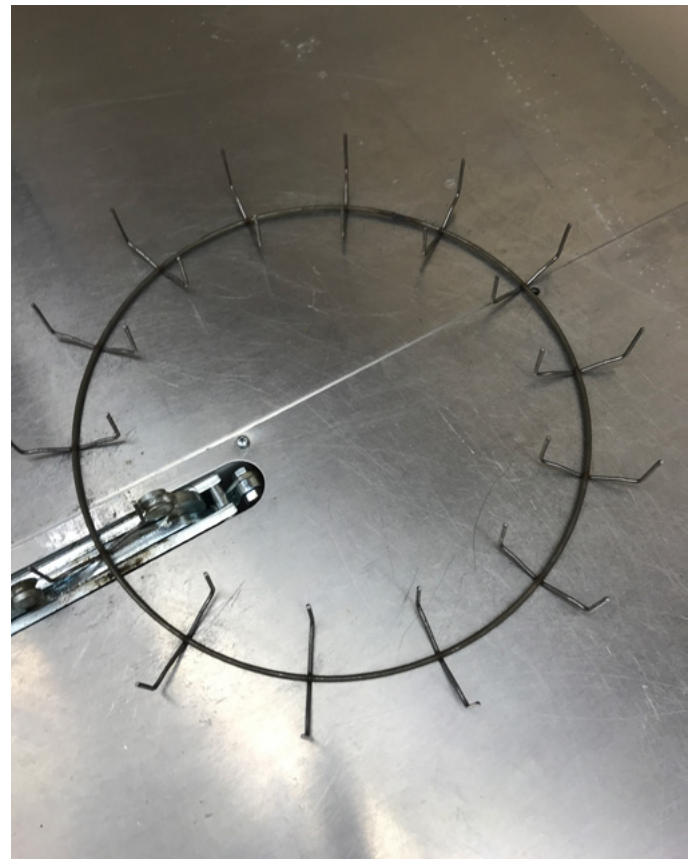


Figure 1. Clamp wreath forms are manufactured in various sizes.



Figure 2. The clamp mechanism pinches heavy-gauge wreath wires around a gathered bunch of plant material stems.



Figure 3. A pedal-operated clamp mechanism attached to a work table is the best practice for commercial producers.



Purchasing the materials to make this design from a wholesale florist would cost around \$50. Our study found that consumers are willing to pay much less than that figure, on average around \$26. However, this should not be the deciding factor in producing these products. Farmer florists can grow, process, manufacture, and market these wreaths and maintain a profit. This design can be augmented with additional preserved or permanent botanicals (silk flowers) to attract customers, but some clients prefer a rugged, natural look.

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