

The Williamsburg Ball

My last house had a front porch that simply demanded a hanging planter. Every SPRING I would stuff as many semi-shade loving specimens into the pot, along with every kind of tropical hanging vine I could find. For FALL, I replaced the annuals with chrysanthemums and aster, along with ornamental kales and long strands of Boston ivy. But bleak was my WINTER until I discovered the "Williamsburg Ball!" Known in Williamsburg, Virginia as the "kissing ball," this hanging sphere radiates with variations of fresh evergreens, pinecones, and on occasion, fruits such as apples, limes, nuts, and pomegranates--whatever! Weatherproof ribbon adds the finishing touch.

One year, my Williamsburg Ball lasted well into SPRING. I had removed the red ribbons, but couldn't bear to take down the still green ball. To our surprise, one day we noticed a little wren flying back and forth from the ball. Yes, there was a little nest inside the kissing ball! The ball soon began to turn rusty brown, but how could I remove it? I'm sure the neighbors wondered why this dead Christmas decoration was still hanging on the front porch!

Step 1: To start your KISSING BALL base, you will need a block of OASIS (florist foam) and some CHICKEN WIRE. The OASIS should be roughly one-third the diameter of the finished ball, so a finished ball of 18" requires a 6" square of OASIS. Clip the sharp corners of the OASIS and soak it in water for 30 minutes.

Step 2: Take a flat piece of chicken wire and carefully form it around the soaked OASIS. Lock it together with pliers. The OASIS is fragile when wet, so handle with care. Add a long piece of wire to the top. This wire will be used to hang the ball while you work, so make it longer than you eventually will need. Find a place to work on your ball. I did it in my unfinished basement and tied it to one of the ceiling pipes. Keep it at eye level while you work. Now add another long wire to the bottom of the ball. (This wire will eventually hold the bow and ribbon strands, so make it long enough to allow for the branches that will be radiating from the base.)

Step 3: Assemble your various evergreens on a table under the hanging base: SPRUCE, YEW, BOXWOOD, HOLLY, BALSAM, PINE, etc. (Use pine sparingly, since it has a tendency to give the ball a “wild” appearance.) Cut your greens to approximately 8” and push the freshly cut end into the wet OASIS to a depth of 2 inches. Place one at the top of the ball, one on each side, and then one on the bottom. Then continue skipping all around the ball to keep it even, until no OASIS or CHICKEN WIRE can be seen. Periodically step back from the ball to monitor the shape, keeping it round.

Step 4: Now that you have an actual ball, you can embellish it with pinecones, bows, fruit, etc. To secure a pinecone, wrap a wire stick around the middle, making sure the wire is hidden under the appendages, and push it into the ball. To secure nuts, hot glue each walnut to a thick wooden skewer and push it into the ball. Keep the ball snug: the pinecone should not be sticking out, but part of the sphere. Apples, pears, pomegranates can be prepared with wooden skewers and pressed into the ball. Fruit will periodically need to be replenished when it starts to look bad.

Step 5: Attach a large bow with streamers to the bottom wire for a festive touch. Hang the ball in its final location, but before you cut the excess top wire, take a walk to the street to determine if you need to make adjustments in height.