Holiday Decorations at The Cloisters
The wreaths and garlands that deck The Cloisters from early December until early January are made from plant stuffs associated with the medieval celebration of Christmastide. This great feast embraced the twelve days between the Nativity and the Epiphany, which commemorated the visit of the Three Kings to the infant Jesus.

Because pictorial representations of medieval Christmas decorations are rare, the Museum’s designs are based on evidence gleaned from carols, wassails, romances, and artworks. Medieval churches and halls were decked for the season, a practice with roots in ancient custom. The early Church had banned the use of evergreens because of their ties with pagan winter festivals, such as the Roman Saturnalia. By the Middle Ages, these plants had been given Christian interpretations and were used to celebrate the feast days of the Church calendar. Bay laurel, associated in ancient times with victory, became a symbol of the triumph of Christ and of eternal life.
While today we think of wreaths and garlands as purely decorative, certain plants were agents of blessing and protection in the Middle Ages and were used ceremonially. The placing of such plants above a doorway is an ancient practice common to many cultures. Visitors entering the Museum pass under a great arch of holly—the plant associated above all others with the medieval feast. The doorways in the Main Hall are adorned with arches of ivy, apples, hazelnuts, and rosehips.

By the Middle Ages, holly and ivy had been thoroughly Christianized, although mistletoe remained suspect. Ivy was identified with the Virgin, and the red berries of the holly with the blood of Christ. The holly and ivy carols still sung today spell out these meanings yet also maintain older associations derived from pre-Christian winter festivals. A group of English carols set down in the fifteenth century preserve evidence of a ritual contest between boys bearing branches of holly and girls bearing ivy. The red-berried holly, symbolizing light and life, was meant to prevail over the black-fruited ivy, which signified the dark and cold of winter. Thus, ivy remained outside the door while holly was carried triumphantly into the hall.

Apples and nuts, stored for winter consumption, were a conspicuous part of the Christmas feast, as they are today. It was also the custom in winter to wassail fruit and nut
trees, to encourage them to bear plentiful crops in the coming year. Fruits and nuts were ancient symbols of fertility that came to bear specifically Christian meanings: in a medieval poem on the Nativity, the hard shell of the nut is interpreted as the wood of the Cross, and the sweet kernel is said to signify Christ. Nuts, apples, and other fruits often appear in representations of the Virgin and Child.

The ancient identification of wheat with life and renewal was incorporated into Christian liturgy and iconography. In Nativity scenes of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a sheaf of wheat is often shown near the crib in which the Christ Child lies; sometimes the infant Jesus rests on a heap of wheat in allusion to the bread of the Mass. A sheaf of wheat stands near the altar in Langon chapel in reference to this Eucharistic symbolism.

Wheat’s old associations with the promise of fertility and increase in the coming year were also preserved, and folk rites and practices involving grain gravitated to the Christmas season. The celebration of the new year included ceremonies in which a sheaf of wheat kept from the harvest was used to make frumenty, a special dish of spiced and sweetened wheat berries boiled in milk. Sheaves of grain were also kept to provide a special meal for sheep and cattle. Francis of Assisi’s biographer records that the saint urged town dwellers to spread grain in the streets so that the birds too might share in the Christmas feast.

The rosehips used in the decorations allude to the rose symbolism so prominent in medieval Christmas carols. A number of plants that would not have been living or blooming at that season were linked symbolically to Advent, the Nativity, or Epiphany. There were also many stories of plants and trees, especially hawthorn, apples, and roses, that bloomed miraculously on Christmas Eve. Pots of hellebores, rosemary, myrtle, bay laurel, citrus and cyclamen are displayed in the Saint-Guilhem Cloister and The Judy Black Garden in the Cuxa Cloister.