

# There is more to holly than just the holidays

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American holly! The state tree of Delaware has many outstanding qualities: the vibrant complementary colors of red fruits and green leaves, the beauty of these evergreen trees in our winter woodlands, and of course its use as a seasonal holiday decoration. See how many of the following holly facts below are new to you.

American holly (*Ilex opaca*) grows slowly to about 50 feet tall in our forests, where it tolerates the shady conditions of the understory. Its range is from Massachusetts to Florida.

Worldwide, the holly family (*Aquifoliaceae*) contains only one genus, holly (*Ilex*); a condition called monotypic. The holly genus (*Ilex*) contains 300 to 400 different species, four of which are native to Delaware.

The common name "holly" is probably derived from Old English, Old German, and maybe Celtic. The scientific name "Ilex" came from the Latin name for the Holm or Holly oak (*Quercus ilex*), which has holly-like leaves.

Hollies are generally dioecious ("two homes"), which means separate male and female trees. So, you need to have some pollen-producing male trees, in order to get fruit on the female trees. I get a kick out of the names of some of the ornamental hollies, like *Ilex xmeserve* "Blue Stallion," and *Ilex xmeserve* "Blue Angel"; and *Ilex opaca* "Jersey Knight" and *Ilex opaca* "Jersey Princess" — it's easy to see which are male and which are female.

Holly's use as a winter holiday decoration dates back to ancient times in Europe. Even 2,000 years ago, holly was part of winter solstice celebrations. It was sacred to Celtic Druid priests in Britain and France, for good will and warding off evil spirits.

Holly continued to be important in winter celebrations under Christianity. A Germanic custom was to decorate houses with holly as a refuge for woodland sprites. Holly also symbolized springtime renewal, fertility and growth. Imagine if we still continued the tradition of carrying a burning holly tree through town to symbolize the death of winter! Apparently, it wasn't until around 1840 that holly decorations were replaced by the Christmas tree, in England. In North America, early British colonists quickly adopted the American holly, which closely resembled their familiar English holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), also with spiny evergreen leaves and red fruits.

In the early 1900s, the largest production of holiday holly wreaths and decorations in the world was right here in Delaware, in Milton, which was known as "The Land



Delaware State University/Susan Yost  
The native American holly (*Ilex opaca*) beautifies our woodlands, and is also considered one of the finest evergreen holly trees for ornamental plantings.

## Garden Tales

uncommon (McAvoy and Bennett, 2001, "Flora of Delaware"). The first two of these species are evergreen, while the last two lose their leaves in winter. Only the American holly is a tree; the other three are shrubs.

The importance of planting native species to support food webs for insects (including beautiful butterflies), birds and other animals, is eloquently described in a recent book, Douglas Tallamy's "Bringing Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants" (2007). Delaware's native holly species make very attractive ornamentals. American holly is "considered by many gardeners as the finest tree-type evergreen holly" (Dirt, 1997, "Dirt's Hardy Trees and Shrubs"). Inkberry, *Ilex glabra*, is an excellent shrub for landscaping, with its small leaves with three small teeth and black fruits. Winterberry holly, *Ilex verticillata*, is spectacular in winter with its bright red berries on leafless stems.

Many other species and cultivars of holly are planted as ornamentals. American holly alone has more than 1,000 cultivated varieties. Nonnative hollies that are hardy in the mid-Atlantic region include: English holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), with distinctively lustrous leaves; Japanese holly (*Ilex crenata*), a shrub with small non-spiny leaves; Nellie R. Stevens' holly, a cross between the English holly and Chinese holly; the popular Highclere holly (*Ilex xaltacelerensis*); Meserve or blue holly (*Ilex xmeserveae*).

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of Holly." This was an important source of income for many rural families, but eventually holly trees had to be protected by law.

Among other uses of American holly are holly wood, which is very hard, smooth and white, and used for chess pieces and looms; and holly honey.

The fruit of a holly is usually called a "berry," but technically it's a drupe (stone fruit). The seeds take a long time to germinate. Holly fruits are considered mildly poisonous to humans. The leaves have been used medicinally for fever, colds and wounds. Holly fruits play an important ecological role as food for birds such as gold finches and cedar waxwings, especially in winter. The birds, in turn, disperse the seeds. The holly leaf is food for leaf miners (larval stage of insects, especially flies). The holly fruit is home to the larvae of the holly berry midge (interestingly, these fruits stay green, and thus don't get eaten by birds which are attracted to red, thus saving the midge larvae!).

The four native Delaware holly species are: the very familiar American holly (*Ilex opaca*), ink-berry (*Ilex glabra*), winterberry holly (*Ilex verticillata*), and smooth winterberry holly (*Ilex laevigata*) which is

America.

Finally, a bit of local lore: there is a pair of "bride and groom" (hence, female and male) American holly trees at the Woodburn Governor's House in Dover.

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost, Herbarium Educator) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.

with bluish-purple stems and shiny leaves, described as a "magnificent series of introductions" (Dirt); Foster's holly (*Ilex xaltenuata* 'Fosteri'), considered very beautiful with its brilliant fruits; and Chinese holly (*Ilex cornuta*), with rectangular leaves. One of my favorites is longstalk holly (*Ilex pedunculosa*), with fruits on long stalks like small cherries.

Additionally, there are the "caffeine hollies", used to make leaf teas. These include yaupon (*Ilex vomitoria*), used by SE American Indians to make a purgative ceremonial "black drink"; and also mate (*Ilex paraguariensis*), a common drink in South