There is more to holly
than just the holidays

By Susan Yost, Ph.D.

American holly! The state tree of Delaware has many outstanding qualities: the vibrant, colorful 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 xmaserve “Blue Stallion,” and Ilex xmaserve “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