

Ilex aquifolium

[Synonyms : *Ilex aquifolium* var. *heterophylla*, *Ilex balearica*]

HOLLY is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to Europe and the Mediterranean it has tiny scented, often purple-tinged, dull white flowers.

It is also known as *Acebo* (Spanish), *Akvifolio ilekso* (Esperanto), *Aquifoglio* (Italian), Aunt Mary's tree, Berry holly, Berry holm, *Bois franc* (French), *Celynnen* (Welsh), *Cesmína obecná* (Czech), *Cesmína ostrolistá* (Czech, Slovak), Christmas, Christ's thorn, Common holly, *Cúileann* (Irish Gaelic), *Cuileann* (Scottish Gaelic), English holly, European holly, He-holly, Hollin, Holm, Holme chase, Holy tree, *Housse* (Channel Islander-Guernsey and Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Houx* (French), Hulm, *Hulst* (Dutch), Hulver bush, *Ilekso ordinara* (Esperanto), *Ilex*, *Järnek* (Swedish), Killin, *Kristtorn* (Danish, Swedish), Mountain holly, Prick bush, Prickly Christmas, and *Stechpalme* (German); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of 'am I forgotten?', domestic happiness, foresight, friendship, good wishes, holiness (tree), masculinity (tree), and steadfastness (tree).

Warning – the berries are poisonous. They can cause vomiting, nausea, violent diarrhoea, drowsiness and possible death. No cases of bird or animal poisoning have been recorded.

Aquifolium is derived from a classical Latin name for holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), and Latin *-folia* (leaved) meaning 'with holly-like leaves'.

The Old English name *holen* or *holegn* was derived from *ulex* and led first to Holme, Hulver or Hulfere then Holy Tree and eventually Holly as the plant is known today.

Although holly is not normally associated with very wet or very dry areas an English holly wood in Kent, the Holmstone Wood on dry shingles at Dungeness (mention of which has been found in an 8th Century manuscript) and holly found in Hampshire in New Forest bogs would seem to put the lie to this contention.

Holly is bound up with a mass of superstition and tradition from many countries. It featured in pagan customs long before the Christian traditions and today's practices emerged. The Roman festival of Saturn was celebrated from 17th-19th December and during this period sprigs, branches and bunches of holly were given as a sign of goodwill, together with other gifts. It is understood that the Christian Church of Bracara (if no other) issued an edict forbidding the decoration of homes with holly during the Saturnalia. In Britain as well, a Fire Festival was celebrated at about the time of the Christian Christmas and this involved fertility rites in which prickly holly represented the male element and entwining ivy (*Hedera helix*) that of the female: Then too Druids provided a resting place for sylvan spirits by decorating their huts with holly boughs. In addition the Roman occupation had brought the cult of Mithras which became widespread in the Country for about 100 years and followers celebrated the birth of Mithras on 25th December (in fact some authorities argue that various key dates in the Christian calendar were adopted from the Mithraic ritual). Today's practice in Britain of decorating the home with holly (with or without other evergreens such as bay, *Laurus nobilis*) must go back thousands of years and, as those years passed, so its significance altered to the point where it is purely viewed as an attractive custom or, in churches, a decoration symbolic of eternal life.

In Christian lore, as many of the Christmas carols sung today testify, the thorns on the holly signify the Passion of Christ and the small brilliant red berries, His blood. According to a French legend from the Brittany region the robin often associated with Christmas in some northern European countries acquired its red breast when it tried to ease Christ's suffering by picking the thorns from His brow as He carried the Cross to Calvary. The holly berry is often claimed to be the robin's favourite food and English and German superstition holds that it is unlucky to tread on the fruit in acknowledgement of the little bird's selfless action.

Red berries and evergreen are almost universal as a symbol of good luck. Some people believe that prickly male holly is lucky for men and smooth, variegated female holly species are lucky for women. The Roman natural historian, Pliny (23-79), writes that holly flowers will make water freeze, its wood thrown at or near an animal will compel the creature to lie down beside the missile, and that if holly is grown near a house or farm the property will be protected against witchcraft and lightning, and poison will be repelled. It is still said today that to dream of holly indicates a quarrel.

When people believed in elves and fairies holly, with branches from certain other trees, garlanded churches as a sign of welcome. At one time it was believed that the household would be safe from thunder and lightning if a holly tree grew nearby, and as a protection against witches, demons and the evil eye leaves and berries could be brought inside. If no holly grows outside the house a sprig of holly should be kept inside as protection against lightning, and a death in the family is assured if green holly branches are burnt. Trees were also grown in churchyards to give similar protection. Coachmen used whips with holly wood handles when they drove at night for the same reason. Some superstition still remains today for some as bringing flowering holly inside or stamping on berries is considered to be unlucky, and cutting down a holly tree is bound to bring misfortune. Also many berries on the trees and bushes are said to presage a hard Winter. One English tradition that may still be seen occasionally even now requires a sprig of berried holly as a decoration for the beehive to wish the bees a 'Merry Christmas'.

Many areas believed that it was unlucky to bring holly inside the house before Christmas. For many it was also thought that ill luck would come down the chimney on Christmas Eve if the holly was hung inside before mistletoe (*Viscum album*). In many households it used to be essential to ensure that both smooth and prickly holly, to be used as decoration, were brought into the house at exactly the same time. If one or the other preceded it would determine which partner dominated for the rest of the year – the mistress (smooth 'She-holly'), the master (prickly 'He-holly'). For many even now, after the celebrations the holly must be removed no later than Twelfth Night Eve (Epiphany Eve or 5th January) – unless an older tradition is supported when it may stay until Candlemas (2nd February), or yet another under which it is kept (with other evergreen decorations) until Shrove Tuesday (the eve of Lent in the Christian calendar). Whichever tradition was/is upheld many regions believe(d) that the holly and other evergreens must then be burnt, while others (though probably fewer) contended that it was disastrous to burn old decorations. These customs apply of course to all the Christmas decorations in the home and were generally distinct from those traditions associated with church decorations. Some believed that a branch of berried holly from the latter would bring good fortune for the rest of the year if hung in the home. While some were sure that church decorations had to be removed by Twelfth Night (6th January), others thought it should be Candlemas, the Vigil of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary (usually 1st or 2nd February) and others Good Friday in the Christian calendar.

A strange Welsh custom said to have been enacted until about the end of the 19th Century was claimed to commemorate the stoning of St. Stephen. On that Saint's Day

(26th December), also known to participants as Holly-beating or Holming Day, young boys beat each others bare legs with holly in order to draw blood – and similarly some are also held to have attacked the bare arms of any serving wench within range.

The holly is the badge of the Scottish Drummond clan and it also appears in the Maxwell crest. The English playwright and poet, William Shakespeare (1564-1616), mentions holly once in his plays in the song near the end of *As You Like It*.

.....thy breath be rude.
Heigh, ho! sing, heigh, ho! unto the green holly;
Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly,
Then, heigh, ho! the holly!
This life is most jolly.

And roughly two hundred years later his compatriot, the poet George Crabbe (1754-1832) wrote

All green was vanished save of pine and yew,
That still displayed their melancholy hue;
Save the green holly with its berries red,
And the green moss that o'er the gravel spread.

Hard holly wood was used to make mathematical instruments and calico printing blocks, and when stained various colours it was sometimes chosen as an alternative to ebony (*Diospyros ebenum*) for the handles of metal teapots. Sticks made prized lightweight driving whips (the compact white wood was still being used for these in the 1950s) and were also made into walking sticks. Today the wood can still be used by cabinetmakers for furniture.

The bark used to be made into bird-lime – at one period in such quantities that it was exported to the East Indies as an insecticide. In Europe the bird-lime has been, and still is in some areas, spread on branches to trap small birds that land on it. They end up in the soup pot. The leaves of this species of holly have been used to make a tea, particularly in Germany in the Black Forest area. In Corsica an alternative to coffee has been made from the roasted and powdered berries.

This holly came to be known to a few North American Indian tribes. The Micmac Indians used it to treat fever and also prescribed the root for treating tuberculosis, coughs and some urinary problems.

Bruised and dried, young holly stems have provided cattle fodder, and pet rabbits have been said to regain lost appetite by gnawing a holly stick.

Medicinally, holly leaves were recommended by herbalists for treating bronchitis, diarrhoea, pleurisy, smallpox and rheumatism – fever and chilblains. (These last could be unnecessarily traumatic ‘cures’. For the former it involved scratching the legs with prickly holly, and for the latter beating the chilblains with holly branches followed by a tramp through deep snow.) The juice from the leaves was considered to be an admirable remedy for jaundice. The berries, although their poisonous qualities have long been appreciated, were viewed as a remedy for wind and fluid retention, and dried and powdered were also used to stem bleeding. It is claimed too that fresh milk drunk from holly wood cups once formed part of a treatment for whooping-cough in some areas.

Now in northern Europe it is little used for medicinal purposes, even in folk medicine. It is the birthday flower for 5th March, and is also associated with December.