

*Ilex opaca*

[Synonyms : *Ilex arenicola*, *Ilex cumulicola*, *Ilex pygmaea*, *Ilex quercifolia*]

**WHITE HOLLY** is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to eastern North America it has tiny, greenish-white flowers.

It is also known as American holly, *Amerikanische Stechpalme* (German), Boxwood, Christmas holly, Evergreen holly, Holly, Holly berry, Prickly holly, and Yule holly.

Warning – the berries (especially the seeds) are said to be poisonous, and could be an especial danger for young children who can be attracted to them. They can cause vomiting, diarrhoea and stupor.

*Opaca* means ‘dull or opaque, not shining’.

Some North American Indian tribes in the region that eventually became Pennsylvania viewed the small, scarlet (occasionally yellow) holly berries as an emblem of courage. Holly was associated with past happiness and tribal victories, and different parts of the plant symbolized certain desirable qualities. Leaf spines signified refusal to accept insults and ferocity in battle, while the tough wood was an emblem of a tribe’s refusal to accept defeat at the hands of its enemies. This holly was also planted around Indian homes as a protection from evil spirits.

Local Indian tribes preserved the fruit in a way that hardened them and maintained their size, shape and colour. These were then used for buttons or other decoration on clothing and were also a popular trading commodity with tribes living in areas devoid of the plant. The holly was also embroidered on clothing and shields.

The berries yielded a dye for the North American Cherokee Indians, who also used the nearly white wood for carving and for making spoons.

For several North American tribes white holly provided medicine. The Catawba Indians took a leaf infusion as a treatment for measles – and also used it for skin sores. The Choctaw and Alabama tribes applied it to sore eyes, the former using a leaf decoction and the latter a bark decoction. The stiff and leathery, dull olive-green leaves were used by the Cherokee to scratch cramped muscles, and the tribe also chewed the berries to counter indigestion. Koasati Indians applied a bark infusion to itching skin.

Like the holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), white holly has been picked as a traditional Christmas decoration – ever since the early settlers arrived in North America and adopted it for this purpose. In Louisiana the berries were kept until the following Christmas for good luck.

The wood has been used for carving, engraving, turning, scrollwork and inlay work on furniture, as well as for making musical keyboard instruments, scientific instruments and tool handles.

As with other holly species that have attracted the topiarist’s eye, white holly has been cultivated over many centuries into many different shapes. One of the most famous examples of this is probably the maze created with it at the Governor’s Palace at Williamsburg, Virginia. This forms a 90 ft.-sided quadrangle but with only 2 parallel sides, and the hedges gradually decrease in size from 8 ft. on the outside to 5 ft in height at the centre. The gardens there embrace many other examples of topiary that have used different species of holly as well.

White holly is a state emblem for Delaware in the United States and was adopted in 1939.

Medicinally, the fruit have been used to treat lung conditions, measles, wind, constipation, gout, rheumatism and fever.