

The Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*)

On this homepage you normally find information concerning events organized in our associations and news from our movement.

This year you will also find some interesting and broader information concerning different plants and the traditions about them.

The first flash deals with holly.

Botany

Even the Latin name for holly has its own story. Its genus name *Ilex* was once the name of a species of Mediterranean oak that had leaves with spiny edges, *Quercus ilex*. The former Latin name for holly was *Aquifolium*, but Linnaeus gave it the name *Ilex*, a Celtic word meaning "point", and the European or "English" holly became *Ilex aquifolium*. This species, or rather the cultivars derived from it, is the one most commonly grown for Christmas holly, primarily because of its red berries. This is the only species that grows spontaneously in Europe up to 1,500 meters in altitude.

Description

The common holly grows as a shrub or tree that progresses very slowly, with some plants maturing into trees of **4 to 6 meters** in height that can **live 300 years**. As with mistletoe, the tree is **evergreen as it does not lose all its leaves at once**. The holly is dioecious, meaning that male and female flowers are borne on different trees, although some monoecious subjects can be found. The plant's wood is a greyish-white colour that darkens with age. It is a very hard wood and as such it was used to make sledge and mallet handles as well as teeth on gear wheels.

Following the appearance of small, white flowers, branches covered with red berries, which may also be yellow, black or white, are sought at Christmas time. The evergreen leaves of the holly result in it being considered as a **New Year plant** together with boxwood, laurel, yew, ivy, juniper and gorse, depending on the region.

History of the holly, a sacred plant

- In ancient times, during the period where the language of flowers was most widely "spoken", houses and alters were decorated with wreaths and garlands, persons decorated themselves or loved ones were thanked through gifts of floral compositions with vegetation and flowers conveying a message. Each plant had a symbolic meaning, and by combining different plants one could send a message.
- To the Romans, a crown of holly was offered to newlyweds as a sign of best wishes and congratulations. The Romans celebrated the Saturnalia during the winter solstice week in honour of Saturn, the god of agriculture and grape growing, by sending presents decorated with holly. Before them the Greek celebrated the same feast called "Kronia" in honour of Cronos, the god of fertility and harvest.
- The druids of the Gauls and the Celts believed that the sun never left holly plants.

By decorating their homes with branches of holly, the spirits of the forest could take refuge with them during the hard winters and the spiny leaves kept away bad spirits and witches.

- Some North American Natives planted holly near their homes. They also discovered a way to dry the berries that kept them round and shiny so that they could use them to decorate their clothes and hair and as currency for trading with other peoples who were ignorant of holly. The sturdy stem represented their strength, the thorns their ferocity, and the longevity of the leaves, their courage against foes.

Medicinal use

A decoction of holly leaves and bark has often been considered more efficient than quinine in treating intermittent fever.

Several species, such as *Ilex chinensis*, are part of traditional Chinese medicine.

Paraguay tea (*Ilex paraguariensis*), also known as *mate* or *yerba mate*, is a nervous, muscular and cerebral stimulant used during the First World War by the British, French and German armies.



Never eat the berries of the holly, they are poisonous

Liliane Lenfant



(1) The art of topiary: This is the practice of training live plants by clipping trees and shrubs to develop hedges, flower beds or other subjects into clearly defined geometric shapes or characters, animals, etc. This art evolved during the era of ancient Rome and is similar to sculpture.

(2) Linneaus: Carl von Linné was a Swedish naturalist who developed the basis of the modern system of binomial nomenclature. He systematically indexed, named and classified most of the known living species.



