Christmas Holly: History, Winter Solstice
At Winter Solstice, "Oak King" Supplants "Holly King"

By David Beaulieu, About.com Guide

Christmas holly and the approach of the winter holiday season don't hold the same meaning for everyone. For those of us keenly aware of the cycle of the seasons, the approach of Yuletide means the winter solstice is coming. In the snowy North, the winter solstice is the day on which the rest of the year pivots for lovers of landscaping and gardening.

"Things have to get worse before they can get better." Those of us in northern climes who enjoy seeing plants growing outside understand the wisdom behind this observation, when autumn draws to a close and the winter solstice approaches. On the one hand, with each passing day of autumn we are robbed of more and more daylight. On the other hand, we know that, when the winter solstice does arrive, we'll turn the corner: the shortest day will have been reached, and from then on we can only gain daylight -- imperceptibly, to be sure, but also inexorably.

Ancient peoples, who spent more time outdoors than we do, were acutely aware of this annual ebb and flow of daylight, the two poles of which are the winter solstice and its summer counterpart. For the Celts, what we know as Christmas holly trees had a place in their rituals marking these two poles, each of which indicate when the sun is at its greatest distance from the equator. Here are the essential facts about the summer and winter solstice:

These two critical junctures of the year's progress figure prominently in the magic and mythologies of many ancient peoples throughout history. Again, in Celtic mythology the two are strongly linked to holly. Sprigs of the plant were worn in the hair during the mistletoe rituals performed by the priests of the Celts, the Druids, at the summer and winter solstice observances. The pointy leaves of holly were thought to afford magical protection against evil spirits. Holly sprigs were also brought into their dwellings during the cold-weather months in the belief that they afforded shelter to the fairies, those tiny spirits of the forest. [Source: Mara Freeman.]

In Celtic mythology the "Oak King" and the "Holly King" were twins, pitted against each other in a never-ending fight for supremacy. Oak trees, sacred to the Celts, are deciduous, while the English holly (Ilex aquifolium) native to their lands is evergreen. As cold weather approached, the Celts marveled at how the evergreen holly trees, hidden amongst the leafy oaks the rest of the year, now stood out prominently on an otherwise barren landscape. The Holly King had won out, as it were, as the incarnations of his twin brother had shed all their leaves and stood naked in defeat.

But by the time the winter solstice arrives, the tide has turned: the Oak King's flow in power is the Holly King's ebb. The deciduous twin takes his first baby steps towards re-establishing his supremacy. The Oak King's supremacy won't reach its zenith until midsummer, when the oaks will be in full leaf again. At which point, it is now the Holly King who will be riding the new wave. The evergreen twin lies the foundation in the summer heat for a reign that will culminate in the winter solstice. Thus ironically, whenever either king reaches the height of his dominance, at that very time he is doomed to be supplanted. Which is why we daylight-cravers have reason to be of good cheer as the winter solstice approaches: at our darkest hour, time will soon again be on our side....

For the Romans, "Holly was used to honor Saturn, god of agriculture, during their Saturnalia festival held near the time of the winter solstice. The Romans gave one another holly wreaths, carried it in processions, and decked images of Saturn with it," according to the Kentucky Cooperative Extension (the Saturnalia was the festival upon which the Christmas holiday was directly modeled). Evergreens such as Christmas holly were adopted by common Christians as a Christmas decoration, in spite of protests from Church Fathers such as Tertullian. A tiny flicker of this age-old controversy still burns today, as I discuss in my article on the History of Christmas Tree Decorating.
In Christian folklore the prickly leaves of Christmas holly trees came to be associated with Jesus' crown of thorns, while their berries represented the drops of blood shed for humanity's salvation. This symbolism can be found, for example, in the Christmas carol, "The Holly and the Ivy." Christian folklore also identified Christmas holly wood as the wood used to build Jesus' holy cross. In fact, some scholars think that the word, "holly," is simply a corruption of "holy," although there is no general consensus on this point.

But what there is a general consensus on is the diversity and versatility of Christmas holly trees, which is the subject of Page 2.

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