

University of Vermont Extension Department of Plant and Soil Science



Winter Holiday News

Article

DECK THE HALLS WITH BOUGHS OF HOLLY

By Dr. Leonard Perry, Extension Professor
University of Vermont

Holly has become almost synonymous with the holiday season. Its bright red berries and shiny green leaves are found on holiday wrapping paper, greeting cards, and of course, live in garden shops.

But did you know that "decking the halls with holly" is an ancient custom several thousand years old? The ancient Romans, Greeks, and Druids all decorated their homes with this plant.

The Druids of pre-Roman Britain believed that holly was a sacred tree that was never deserted by the sun. That belief stemmed from the fact that holly growing in a deciduous forest remained green all winter long.

The Romans considered holly to be a symbol of good will and sent wreaths of it to newlyweds as a token of good wishes and congratulations. Holly also was used during the Festival of Saturn, which was held each year beginning on Dec. 17 to honor the Roman god of sowing and husbandry.

Decorating with holly during midwinter was a custom of the Chinese, too, who used their native holly (*Ilex cornuta*) for decorating temple courts and large halls during their New Year's festivals in February.

Europeans, especially the British, continued the tradition of decorating with holly—a word many scholars believe is a corruption of the words "holy tree"—during their Yuletide season. Writings from 1598 reveal that "every man's house, the parish churches, the corners of streets, and marketplaces in London were decorated with English holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) during the Christmas season." Even stables and beehives were adorned with a sprig or two.

The American Indians made use of the American holly (*Ilex opaca*) for decorations. In areas where it was native, the berries were dried and used for decorations on clothing.

Unfortunately, in the past, many hollies were destroyed by plunderers cutting wild holly with little concern for the owner of the tree. In the last few decades, holly orchards have been developed in the Pacific Northwest where English holly will grow. In fact, that's where most of the holly sold in Vermont is grown. Other holly orchards have been developed in the Southeast where American holly or other

varieties of holly thrive.

Believe it or not, some of the better-managed orchards are reported to yield up to 3,000 pounds of holly per acre for sale to the Christmas trade!

So how about you? Will you follow tradition and deck your halls with boughs of holly this holiday season?

[Return to Perry's Perennial Pages, Articles](#)

