



***Ilex* spp. - Hollies**

*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.*

– William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

illex : a holly for every situation

Holly trees and shrubs are some of the best plants for winter interest. Both evergreen and deciduous hollies produce beautiful berries that not only brighten up the landscape in the winter but also feed birds when other food is not readily available. Berry colors vary from scarlet, blood-red, orange and gold to a deep blue-black. In addition, evergreen holly's lustrous leaves come in various shapes and sizes, with colors ranging from chartreuse to blue-green and variegations of gold, yellow or cream with green. New growth may also be tinged with pink, maroon, or red. Before falling, the leaves of the deciduous holly turn a purple-tinged gold. Branches and twigs on evergreen hollies may be green, lustrous purple or bright yellow and, on deciduous hollies, a bright gray which contrasts well with the red berries against a field of snow.

holly in the landscape

Hollies can serve many purposes in the landscape: as large specimen plants which dominate and anchor a mixed garden; for dense, deer-resistant informal hedges or privacy screens; to give shape and texture to foundation plantings; to soften a fence-line or corner; and combined with other shrubs and perennials in woodland, all-native, and bird-friendly spaces. All hollies take well to pruning, making a shapely hedge or accent-tree shaped into a standard. Cultivars, however, are selected to improve their natural shape, so pruning not usually necessary.

holly friends and companions

Deciduous holly will make a dramatic winter statement when planted with red-twig dogwood or weeping cherry. Evergreen holly is native to the woodland understory and contrasts well with large-leafed *Hosta*, feathery *Astilbe*, and colorful *Heuchera*. Cultivars with variegated and golden leaf colors work well with the purple foliage of barberry, smoke-tree, and *Physocarpus*, while the blue-green foliage and purple stems of the *meserve* group look lovely with silvery *Lamium*, *Tiarella*, *Pulmonaria*, and *Brunnera*. Or, for an Asian woodland garden, group 'Berri-Magic China' with peonies, spirea, and rugosa rose.

berry important

In order for hollies to produce berries, most require a male plant to be the pollinizer for the female plants. Generally, to produce the best crop of berries in evergreen hollies, plant one male for approximately every 3 – 5 female hollies. The male and female plants must flower at the same time and be planted within 30' – 40' proximity to assure that bees, butterflies or other pollinators will be able to visit both plants. Native American holly (*Ilex opaca*) may be found growing wild in nearby woods and may act as a pollinizer for your garden hollies. Deciduous hollies such as *Ilex verticillata* will produce fruit with one male for every 6 – 10 female plants. Some holly cultivars are parthenocarpic meaning they set (sterile) fruit without a pollinizer. Other hollies like *Ilex crenata* are known more for their wonderful foliage, producing berries that are inconspicuous and reducing the need for a pollinizer. Thus, it is important to know which cultivar to choose in order to have the qualities you desire.

holly go lightly – what does she want?

Both evergreen and deciduous hollies will fruit best with full sun but adapt well to partial sun (4-6 hours of direct light). The blue hollies (*Ilex x meserveae*) should have afternoon shade here in St. Louis. Both types of hollies prefer a well-drained, **moist** site. Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*) actually grows best in low spots or along streams and ponds as it is native to swampy areas. Most importantly, all hollies need a slightly acidic soil – the ideal being a pH of 6.0 to 6.5. Very acidic soils (below pH 5.0) may prevent uptake of calcium and magnesium while poor growth and chlorosis may appear in excessively alkaline soils (pH of 7.0 or more). A soil test will indicate if amendments are needed. Most hollies are moderate in growth rate, with some noted exceptions. It is still important, however, to be sure that your chosen site has sufficient space for the mature height and width of your chosen holly – plants grow outwards as well as upwards!

planting tips for holly

- Prepare your site before planting by digging a hole twice as wide and just as deep as the pot. Mix the soil you have removed 50/50 with compost and some Turface or Soil Perfector.
- Mix in one cup of Espoma Holly-Tone per holly plant to lower the pH of the soil and achieve optimum growth.
- Carefully loosen the root system and set the holly plant in the hole with the root flare and the top of the root mass slightly above grade.
- Backfill gently and water it in, using Espoma Bio-Tone or other root-stimulator fertilizer. Any leftover compost/soil mix should be formed into a raised circle (a watering well) around the shrub right below the dripline.
- Add mulch to help conserve water, slow down evaporation, and suppress competing weeds.
- Keep well watered until plant is established. Young hollies do not tolerate drought well.
- Feed established plants with Holly-Tone twice yearly, in spring and fall, using half-strength for the fall application.