



## Hollies – *Ilex* spp.

*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*

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; or
- in combination with other shrubs and perennials in woodland, all-native, bird-friendly spaces.

All hollies take well to pruning, as a well-groomed hedge or shaped into a topiary form. 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, in part-shade gardens, will contrast well with bigleaf hydrangeas or re-blooming azaleas or a border of hosta, heuchera and astilbe.
- Cultivars with variegated and golden leaf colors work well in sunny gardens with the purple foliage of smoke-tree, barberry and nine-bark, while the blue-green foliage and purple stems of the *Meserve* group look lovely with the gray tones of Russian sage and artemisia or backed by some large, silver blue spruce.
- Or, for an Asian-inspired garden, group the gold-branched 'Berri-Magic China' with peonies and a Japanese maple.

## Berry Important

- For hollies to produce berries, most will 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 three to five female hollies. Choose the male cultivar that pairs with your female cultivar.
- 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.
- If you are lucky, 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 six to ten 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.

## Holly Go Lightly – What Does She Want?

- Both evergreen and deciduous hollies will fruit best with full sun (6 or more hours) but adapt well to partial sun which is 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*) is a good choice even for 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 enough 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 *Dr. Earth Acid Lovers Compost* or another high-quality compost, adding *Turface* or *Soil Perfector* to improve drainage.
- Mix in one cup of *Espoma Holly-Tone 4-3-4* into the amended soil to lower the pH of the soil as well as fertilize.
- Carefully loosen the root system of your holly plant and set it in the hole, spreading the roots outward. The root flare and the top of the root mass should be slightly above grade.
- Backfill all around the roots with the soil/compost mix, filling up the hole halfway. Water in. Backfill with more of the mix, and water in again. Add more if any holes or depressions appear.
- Use the leftover soil/compost mix to make a ridge in a ring around the tree or shrub. This ring should start where the edge of the container was and stretch outwards.
- Add mulch to help conserve water, slow down evaporation, and suppress competing weeds.
- Be vigilant about watering until your holly is established. Young hollies do not tolerate drought well.
- Feed established plants with *Espoma Holly-Tone 4-3-4* twice yearly, in spring and fall, using half-strength for the fall application.