

# Hooked on Hollies

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Some of the loveliest plants this time of year are hollies. Sprigs of these ancient plants were brought by the Druids into their dwellings to provide a refuge from the icy, winter weather for the fairy people who were believed to inhabit the forest. Hollies were also said to repel poisons, lightning and witchcraft.

The word 'holly' is derived from the Old English root, *holen*, meaning to prick. This is in reference to the spiny foliage found on the holly varieties we are most familiar with and generally used for our winter decorations. Actually, there are over 400 holly species with at least 34 different leaf shapes. Some are evergreen, others deciduous. Berries may be red, black or even yellow. Hollies also vary in size from just a few feet tall to more than 40 feet in height.

English holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) with its glossy, spiny leaves and bright, red berries is often used for holiday arrangements. Some cultivars have wonderful variegated foliage, but unfortunately, these hollies are only hardy to zone 6 which makes them suitable only for the more southern parts of the state. Better choices for northern areas would be the American holly (*I. opaca*) or Meserve hybrids.

The American holly will eventually become a good sized tree reaching about 45 feet at maturity. It is quite slow growing, having a tight pyramidal shape in youth and becoming more open with age. Leaf color is a duller green when compared to its English relatives but it is still quite attractive. This species prefers an acidic, well-drained soil in full sun to part shade. While it is fairly cold hardy (zone 5), it, like most hollies, may be damaged by desiccating winds so a somewhat sheltered site is best. This plant would be a good candidate for anti-desiccant sprays like Envoy or Wilt-Pruf.

Readily available at most garden center, the Meserve hybrids are crosses between the beautiful English and cold tolerant Rugose hollies. Familiar hybrids include 'Blue Girl', 'Blue Maid', 'Blue Prince' and 'Blue Boy'. 'Blue Princess' is considered one of the best fruit producers of this group.

Most Meserve hybrids will reach about 15 feet in height with 2 inch shiny, bluish-green, spiny leaves and bright red berries. They are all hardy to zone 5. 'China Boy' and 'China Girl' are a little hardier with yellowish-green leaves. All prefer a well-



Photo by Dawn Pettinelli.

drained, sunny site.

Japanese hollies (*I. crenata*) are becoming increasingly popular as foundation and hedging plants. This group of hollies has small, oval-shaped leaves and not very conspicuous black fruits. It is a dense, slow growing shrub maturing at 5 to 10 feet and does well even in part shade. It tolerates shearing much like the ubiquitous yew. Hardy cultivars include 'Convexa', 'Golden Helleri' and 'Sky Pencil'.

Winterberries (*I. verticillata*) are deciduous hollies native to much of the eastern United States. They are generally found growing in damp, swampy sites but will grow well in any moderately moist organic soil. The dark, green leaves fall in October revealing clusters of brilliant, red berries, a choice food for many birds. The species reaches up to 10 feet in height but more compact cultivars can be found, for example, 'Red Sprite' which only grows to between 3 and 5 feet.

A yellow berried form, 'Chrysocarpa' is not as attractive to birds. 'Sparkleberry', an *I. verticillata* x *I. serrata* cross, is a prolific producer of cheery red berries lasting into March. 'Apollo' is a suitable pollinator.

Holly plants are either male or female so if you want berries, be sure to get a female plant as well as a male for successful pollination. One male plant can pollinate about 5 to 10 females. Your local nurseryman should be able to recommend compatible varieties.

Hollies really are beautiful plants in the landscape as well as useful for decorating. Whether you need a specimen plant, additions to your foundation planting or a hedge, don't overlook the varied members of the holly family. If you have questions about selecting or growing hollies or on any other gardening topic, feel free to call the UCONN Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at (877) 486-6271, visit our web site at [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.