

Tale from the Garden!

'The holly and the ivy,
When they are both full grown,
Of all the trees that are in the wood,
The holly bears the crown.'

Traditional English carol

What a year it is for holly! Lots of berries everywhere, thank goodness – Christmas wouldn't be complete without those shiny, dark green leaves and bright berries to decorate doors, bannisters, mantelpieces and halls. For most of us the sight of holly leaves and berries is inextricably linked with Christmas. In the coming weeks, many of us will probably have some form of holly in our house, whether it's a real branch from a tree, a picture on a card, or a decoration on a cake.



Christmas brings with it many traditions & the tradition of decking the halls with boughs of holly at Christmas continues today. Indeed in some parts of Britain, holly was formerly referred to merely as Christmas, and in pre-Victorian times 'Christmas trees' meant holly bushes.

Superstition, magic and myth surround holly's deeply pagan roots. The Druids, Celts and Romans brought evergreens into their homes during winter. They believed their ability to keep their leaves was magical and assured the return of spring.

Though holly doubtless was, and still is, brought into the house for its shiny green leaves and berries, which reflect the light and add colour to the dark days of Yule, it has another significance as well. In Christianity, holly was adopted as a symbol of Christ's crown of thorns; the crimson berries a symbol of his blood and the evergreen a metaphor for life after death, as is related, for example, in the Christmas carol, 'The Holly and the Ivy'. Yet even here the reference to these two plants refers to a pre-Christian celebration, where a boy would be dressed in a suit of holly leaves and a girl similarly in ivy, to parade around the village, bringing Nature through the darkest part of the year to re-emerge for another year's fertility. In Scandinavia it is known as the Christ Thorn.

Holly was also brought into the house variously to protect the home from malevolent faeries or to allow faeries to shelter in the home without friction between them and the human occupants. Whichever of prickly-leaved or smooth-leaved holly was brought into the house first, dictated whether the husband or wife respectively were to rule the household for the coming year!

In Celtic mythology the Holly King was said to rule over the half of the year from the summer to the winter solstice, at which time the Oak King defeated the Holly King to rule for the time until the summer solstice again. These two aspects of the Nature god were later incorporated into Mummers' plays traditionally performed around Yuletide. The Holly King was depicted as a powerful giant of a man covered in holly leaves and branches, and wielding a holly bush as a club. He may well have been the same archetype on which the Green Knight of Arthurian legend was based, and to whose challenge Gawain rose during the Round Table's Christmas celebrations.

However the folklore of the holly is not solely connected with Yuletide festivities. Like several other native trees it was felt to have protective properties, and there were taboos against cutting down a whole tree. Hollies were frequently left uncut in hedges when these were trimmed. A more arcane reason for this was to obstruct witches who were known to run along the tops of hedges, though more practically farmers used their distinctive evergreen shapes to establish lines of sight during winter ploughing. Apparently the Duke of Argyll even had a prospective road rerouted to avoid cutting down a distinctive old holly in 1861.

Although the felling of whole trees was said to bring bad luck, the taking of boughs for decoration, and the coppicing of trees to provide winter fodder, was allowed. Holly leaves proved to be particularly nutritious as winter feed for livestock, and some farmers even installed grinders to make the pricklier leaves more palatable. Coppicing also allowed the holly's hard, white, close-grained wood to be used for inlaid marquetry and to make chess pieces and tool handles. Folklore suggested that the wood had an affinity for control, especially of horses, and most whips for ploughmen and horse-drawn coaches were made from coppiced holly, which accounted for hundreds of thousands of stems during the eighteenth century.

In Scotland the Gaelic name for holly, Chuillin, appears across the country from Cruach-doire-cuilean on Mull, where the local McLean clan adopted holly as their clan badge, to Loch a' Chuillin in Ross-shire in the north; the town of Cullen in Banffshire may also have derived its name from a local holly wood. Holly trees were traditionally known for protection from lightning strikes, to which end they were planted near a house. In European mythology, holly was associated with thunder gods such as Thor and Taranis. We now know that the spines on the distinctively-shaped holly leaves can act as miniature lightning conductors, thereby protecting the tree and other nearby objects. Modern science occasionally catches up with an explanation for what may previously have been dismissed as superstitious lore!

Colour in the winter landscape is still as magical today as it was to the ancients, earning hollies an eternal place in home gardens and a continuing role in many holiday celebrations. Holly is not just for Christmas, it's one of the most benevolent and valuable trees in the Forest. In the Roman festival of Saturnalia, holly branches were used to symbolise 'good wishes', so while we may not be celebrating Christmas Day with all our family & friends, we can at least send our good wishes for a Happy New Year!