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All About Holly

Holly in Ancient Times

The Druids regarded holly as a symbol of fertility and eternal life, thought to have magical powers. While other plants wilted in winter weather, holly remained green and strong, its berries a brightly colored red in the harshest of conditions. Today, Christians have adopted the holly tree as a symbol for Christmas. The sharp leaves are said to symbolize the crown of thorns worn by Christ, while the berries represent his blood. In Druid lore, cutting down a holly tree was said to bring bad luck. In contrast, hanging the plant in homes was believed to bring good luck and protection. Holly was also thought to protect homes against lightning strikes. Romans associated holly with Saturn, the god of agriculture and harvest, and decked the halls with its boughs during the festival of Saturnalia.

Evergreen or Deciduous

Hollies can be evergreen, meaning the plant's glossy leaves are on the tree year-round, or deciduous, meaning the leaves fall off seasonally. Most hollies are evergreens that can thrive in the sunlight or the shade and benefit from well-drained soil. The leaves, characterized by a waxy texture and serrated edges, are **dioecious**, with male and female reproductive structures found on separate plants. Both male and female hollies bloom in May or June, yielding white flowers. But only the females can produce berries. In order for this production to occur, a male plant must be near a female plant for the process of pollination to take place. Insects, like bees, help cross-pollinate female hollies, transferring pollen from the male to the female plants.

Like its holiday companion, mistletoe, a holly's berries are toxic to humans, resulting in nausea and severe stomachaches when ingested. Not so for some animals. Berries are a vital source of food for birds such as thrushes and blackbirds. Holly berries, which ripen in early winter, typically contain four seeds each. The birds that eat these seeds help scatter them for germination, the growth of new holly plants.

Holly Varieties and Cultivars

Argentea marginata (*Ilex aquifolium*)

Popular selection with shiny, dark-green leaves edged with creamy-white margins. Pyramidal grower brightens winter gardens with showy red berries. Plant a male English holly nearby as a pollenizer for berry set.

Gold Coast (*Ilex aquifolium*)

A small evergreen shrub that holds many branches of dense, small, toothy, dark green leaves heavily edged in bright golden yellow. This male form has no berries but will act as a pollenizer for other female English holly varieties. Use to brighten the landscape as a hedge, foundation plant, or landscape accent.

Ilex x Berri Magic Royalty (Blue Prince & Blue Princess) (*Ilex x meserveae*)

Ilex x Berri-Magic Kids (Blue Boy & Blue Girl) (*Ilex x meserveae*)

A profusion of bright red berries fall through winter is assured because a male pollenizer is planted in the same container. Dense, dark blue-green foliage on blue-purple stems creates a beautiful specimen or hedge; tolerates shearing well. Long lasting ornamental fruit is great for use as a holiday decoration. Evergreen

Castle Spire (Ilex x meserveae)

Excellent selection with bright red berries, dark glossy foliage, vigorous growth and branching habit on a compact, narrow, pyramidal form. Thrives in damp soil, native to swampy and boggy areas. Great for borders, screens, hedges, foundation plantings. Plant with Ilex Castle Wall™ for good berry production.

Castle Wall (Ilex x meserveae)

This new compact male Blue Holly has lustrous foliage and superior branching to older varieties. An ideal pollinizer for Castle Spire™ Holly; one plant will enable berry production for several female plants. Attractive winter foliage. Pyramidal form is ideal for hedge or foundation plantings.

Blue Girl (Ilex x meserveae)

Hardest of the hollies! Handsome hedge or specimen displays a profusion of bright red berries fall through winter. Use Blue Boy Holly as a pollinizer for berry set. Displays dense, blue green foliage throughout the year

Blue Boy (Ilex x meserveae)

A handsome shrub with glossy, deep blue-green leaves and purple stems. Ideal as a landscape accent or planted in groups as a dense hedge or screen. The x meserveae species is the hardest of the hollies. An excellent pollinizer for Blue Girl Holly; this male holly pollinizer will not produce berries. Evergreen.

Blue Princess (Ilex x meserveae)

Showy, bright red berries on purple stems embellish the dense, blue-green foliage from fall through winter. Partner with a male blue holly pollinizer such as Blue Prince for a prolific berry set. An excellent hedge plant or foundation shrub. Evergreen

Blue Prince (Ilex x meserveae)

A handsome specimen, background plant or hedge plant, this evergreen shrub has beautiful dark blue-green foliage on blue-purple stems. Also works well at the back of perennial borders or as a privacy screen. An excellent pollinizer for female blue hollies. A very hardy cultivar

Little Rascal (Ilex x meserveae)

This extremely cold hardy, beautiful little evergreen shrub provides outstanding low growing bright green foliage with excellent, dense branching and deep purple winter color. A great choice for a low-maintenance garden. The dense, compact form has a rounded shape fitting nicely in today's landscapes. Useful as a pollinizer for female blue hollies.

Sallywag (Ilex x meserveae)

This robust sport of Little Rascal® Holly shares the same dense, rounded form, but has a more upright habit. The shiny dark green foliage takes on attractive purple-burgundy hue in the fall and winter. A wonderful foundation shrub with improved disease resistance. This male holly pollinizer will not produce berries. Evergreen

Red Beauty (Ilex x Rutzan)

Bright red berries combined with glossy, dark green foliage on this handsome shrub. Effective in pairs to frame an entrance or driveway or massed into a hedge. Maintains dense, upright, conical shape with little or no pruning. Needs a male pollinizer such as Blue Prince Holly nearby to develop berries. Evergreen.

Honey Maid (Ilex x meserveae)

Uniquely patterned blue-green leaves have a creamy-white leaf margin and are complemented by red berries in winter. Great for the mixed shrub border, as a hedge or easily maintained as a foundation plant. Plant with a male holly such as Blue Prince or Castle Wall™ nearby to ensure berry set. Evergreen.

Blue Maid (Ilex x meserveae)

An exceptionally hardy, vigorous, broadleaf evergreen with snag-free, purple-green holly foliage that is well-suited for use along walkways or border plantings. This dense, bushy cultivar with bright red berries and purple stems provides a classic holly look. Partner with a male blue holly pollinizer such as Blue Prince for a prolific berry set.

Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*)

This shrub has multi-seasonal interest with attractive berries that persist into Autumn and Winter along with shiny dark green leaves. Best berry display is after leaves are shed. Tolerates wet soils. Named varieties a pollenizer.

With lush, evergreen foliage and bright berries among most varieties, holly bushes make attractive additions in the landscape. Some, like English holly, are even used as decorative displays throughout the Christmas season. While their year-round beauty is often seen as an asset among other landscape plantings, some types of holly bushes can become unwieldy if left unpruned. Therefore, trimming holly bushes is important for keeping their overall appearance in tip-top shape.

Deciduous Holly

Pruning technique: Radical pruning is needed each year.

Species:

Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata* and cvs.)

Indeterminate Holly

Pruning technique: Thinning and formal shaping can occur throughout the life of the holly.

Species:

Blue holly (*I. × meserveae* and cvs.)

English holly (*I. aquifolium* and cvs.)

Pyramidal Holly

Pruning technique: Young plants should be thinned, but formal shaping is usually not needed.

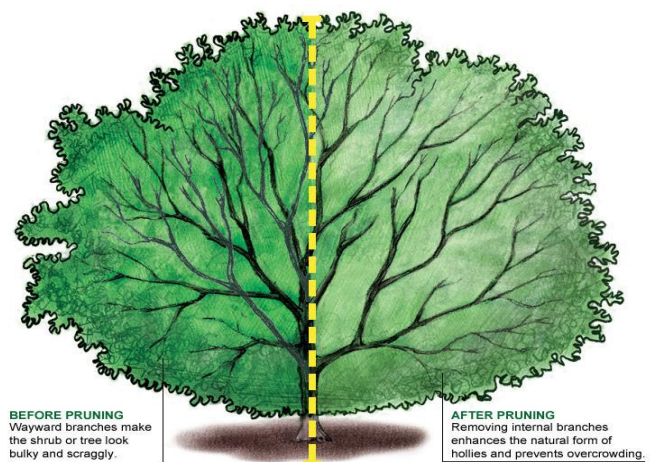
Species:

English holly (*I. aquifolium* and cvs.)

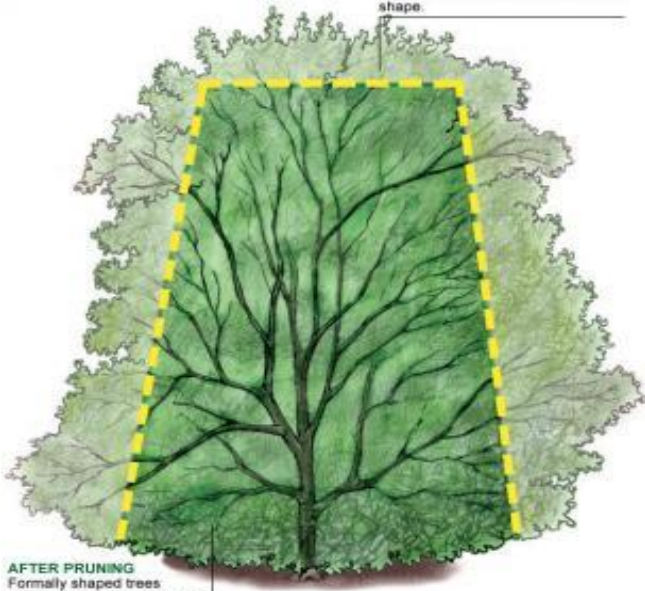
'Nellie R. Stevens' holly (*I. 'Nellie R. Stevens'*)

Thinning reduces interior bulk

In general, hollies have a beautiful natural form, but occasionally some wayward branches creep in. By removing crossing or intersecting branches to a branch union, you can enhance the natural form of your plant. Pruning these branches also prevents overcrowding in the framework of the holly and reduces interior bulk. Ideally, this thinning results in a holly with well-positioned branches and opens it up to better air circulation, helping prevent disease. Over the years, this pruning results in a better organization of branches, eventually reducing the amount of overall pruning your shrub will need. When done correctly, thinning should not be noticeable, so use a cut parallel to the main branch to help hide the unsightly stub.



BEFORE PRUNING
Cutting off the tips of branches to leaf nodes gives hollies a manicured shape.



AFTER PRUNING
Formally shaped trees and shrubs should be slightly larger at the base.

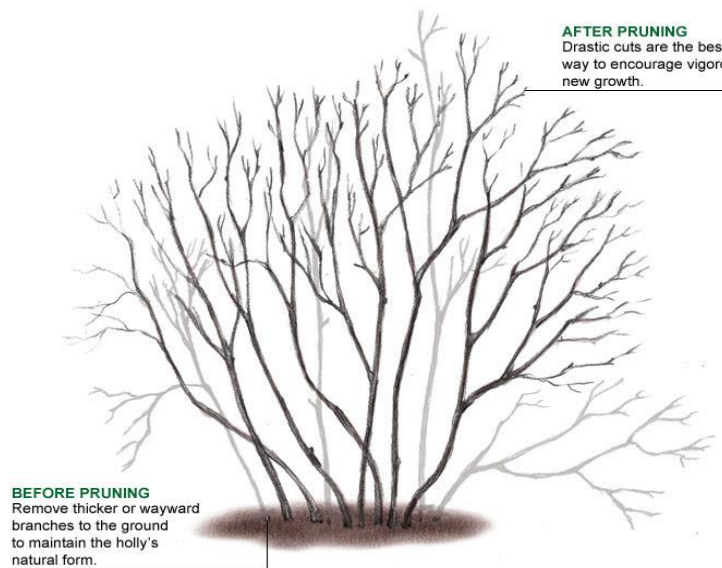
Shaping gives hollies a strong outline

If you are looking to create a hedge or some other formal shape with your holly, use a series of deliberate cuts that removes the end of a branch to a bud or leaf node. This process shortens the branch to create the desired shape but does not remove it. Cuts should be made at an angle, sloping upward in order to conceal the stub. With most formal shapes, the base of the plant should be slightly wider than the top, allowing the sun to reach all areas of the plant and preventing the development of bare legs. Many people mistakenly use this method of pruning to try to control the size of their hollies, but this ends up being a vicious cycle because, like most pruning, it actually promotes new growth.

Radical pruning suits the loose form of deciduous hollies

Deciduous hollies are in a pruning category all their own. These vigorous growers should be thinned back every year in late winter to improve their shape and encourage new growth. Stems that are thicker than a thumb should be cut to the ground, but never remove more than one-third of the shrub. Canes that are old, weak, or spindly and those straying too far outside the main body of the shrub should be the first to go. Then, if there is still pruning to be done, move on to the thickest canes. Although this renewal pruning may seem drastic, it is the best way to maintain the beautiful natural form of deciduous hollies and keep them healthy

AFTER PRUNING
Drastic cuts are the best way to encourage vigorous new growth.



BEFORE PRUNING
Remove thicker or wayward branches to the ground to maintain the holly's natural form.