



Deck the halls!



Celebrated in the loveliest of carols, holly warms hearts anew each winter, but there's more to the spiky gem than merely Christmas cheer, writes Deborah Nicholls-Lee

O READER! hast thou ever stood to see/The Holly-tree?' asked the Romantic poet Robert Southey in his 1809 poem *The Holly-tree*, observing 'with curious eyes' its 'glossy leaves', 'wisdom' and 'fadeless hues'. With its poisonous fruit and spiky leaves, holly puts on a show of hostility—but, like Southey, we have nevertheless taken it to our hearts, especially in December when its crimson berries and waxy foliage, robust enough to outwit Jack Frost, add welcome cheer to winter's stripped-back landscape.

'Holly is of course the special tree of the season,' reads *Cassell's Household Guide* of about 1880. 'Let it be conspicuous throughout the decorations.' We've stayed true to the book's advice, 140 years later, by bringing holly into our homes and hanging it over our hearths or weaving it into festive wreaths.

Although holly may be a familiar sight, it commands a certain reverence. 'Of all the trees that are in the wood,' pronounces the early-19th-century carol *The Holly and the Ivy*, 'the holly bears the crown.' Such royal pretensions can be traced back to the Celts, who personified winter in the figure of a hoary Holly King wearing a prodigious crown of holly. The winter solstice, shortly before Christmas, sees the Holly King at the peak of his powers before he wanes in readiness for his brother, the Oak King, who heralds summer, to resume control in the spring.

The Romans also glorified the plant. 'A holly tree planted in a town house or a country house keeps off magic influences,' wrote

Pliny, whose countrymen decorated their houses with it during the December festival of Saturnalia. In medieval folklore, holly possessed supernatural powers. Holly branches were brought into the home and hung over thresholds to ward off evil spirits; and holly trees were thought to deter witches and offer protection from lightning. To fell such a tree was to invite bad luck. 'Who so ever ageinst holly do sing/He maye wepe and handes wring,' cautions a 15th-century carol.

'In *A Christmas Carol*, it denotes endurance, redemption and the promise of new life'

In Christianity, the holly has additional poignancy, recalling the crown of thorns worn by Jesus, a circular emblem of everlasting life. If we return to *The Holly and the Ivy*, a long-standing favourite with carol singers, the blossom 'as white as any flower' is most likely an evocation of Christ's purity; whereas the holly's berries, 'as red as any blood', remind us of his martyrdom.

Holly is also a prevalent motif in medieval art, appearing, for example, in five of the seven *Unicorn Tapestries* (about 1495–1505), most likely as a symbol of the suffering of Christ, here represented by the unicorn. The holly was something miraculous, suggests John Williamson in his 1986 book on the

tapestries, *The Oak King, the Holly King and the Unicorn*, stating: 'To a primal agrarian society, the sight of the evergreen trees like the holly during the winter months must have been a striking contrast to the naked oaks.'

Leaping forward to the Victorian period, we see holly enjoying a resurgence in art. Its appearance is now something more celebratory than solemn, denoting the festive season and supplying Christmas cheer. In Frederic James Shields's 1858 watercolour *The Holly Gatherers*, two rosy-cheeked girls in capes and bonnets gather armfuls of holly in the snow and Christmas cards from the era feature decorative holly borders framing girls with holly tucked into their hair and their hats.

Literature has built on holly's symbolism for dramatic effect. In Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, the evergreen plant denotes endurance, redemption and the promise of new life. The Ghost of Christmas Past holds 'a branch of fresh green holly in its hand' and the Ghost of Christmas Present wears a holly wreath. In the 1846 poem *Love and Friendship* by Emily Brontë, holly is a symbol of constancy, in contrast with the fickle rose-briar. 'Then scorn the silly rose-wreath now,' she entreats, 'And deck thee with the holly's sheen/That when December blights thy brow/He still may leave thy garland green.'

One of the attractions of holly, for artists and gardeners alike, is surely the surprising number of forms it takes, exceeding 400 different species worldwide. Some varieties sport leaves streaked with flashes of buttery yellow, such as the jauntily named 'Golden Milkboy'; others, such as Blue Prince, have leaves tinged with teal. Purple is added to the paint pot with *Ilex aquifolium* 'Ingramii', which displays plum-coloured stems and has leaf tips that blush magenta in winter. Berries (only borne by female plants) also come in different colours: *Ilex aquifolium* 'Bacciflora', for example, produces yellow fruit from its white cruciform flowers. If it's texture you're seeking, hedgehog holly (*Ilex aquifolium* 'Ferox') is not only prickly on the edges, but has rows of delicate yellow spines piercing the surface of the leaves.

'Holly is also a sanctuary for wildlife,' says James Kendall, founder of Woodland →

Holly interesting

- Common holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) may be slow-growing, but it has been found to reach heights of almost 50ft in some parts of the UK, with girths measuring in excess of 6ft
- One of the country's oldest-known holly trees is located in a former deer park at Knightshayes Court in Tiverton, Devon. It measures some 40ft tall and is estimated to be more than 400 years old
- Not all hollies are evergreen. Some non-native varieties, such as the North American *Ilex verticillata* 'Winterberry', drop their leaves in winter. This doesn't stop the show, however, as the female produces an abundance of gleaming red berries

- Neither are all hollies prickly. The inkberry holly (*Ilex glabra*), for example, named for its black fruit, features oval, spineless leaves that can turn purple in winter, putting on a jolly display without the jeopardy
- Prickles exist to deter browsing animals and the higher the holly leaf, the less prickly it is. In the words of Robert Southey: 'But, as they grow where nothing is to fear/Smooth and unarmed the pointless leaves appear.' In its youth, the holly may 'some harshness show,' he notes, but its upper branches suggest that with maturity comes a certain mellowing

Crowning glory: holly is the king of winter foliage adorned with bright, frosted berries



Green party

Across the UK, gardeners have made holly a bold feature of their designs. Here are four places where holly takes centre stage:

- Wrapped around the Scottish Baronial mansion Threave House, Threave Garden and Nature Reserve in Dumfries and Galloway is home to more than 70 varieties of holly, from species plants such as the pyramid-shaped *Ilex ciliospinosa* (Asian holly), to cultivars such as *Ilex x koehneana* 'Chestnut Leaf', the elongated leaves of which encircle generous clusters of red berries
- In the grand terrace of the gardens of Tyntesfield, a Neo-Gothic property in Somerset now run by the National Trust, holly crowns 10 formal flowerbeds and creates a dramatic approach to the property, forming a procession of immaculately trimmed mushroom-shaped topiary
- Adrian Fisher has designed more than 700 mazes, but his first attempt, in about 1971, was made of holly ('Prepare to be a-maze-d', April 3, 2024). Later, he used the same material for an Italianate maze embedded in Capel Manor Gardens's 30-acre estate in Middlesex. Visitors need to reach the centre, where they will be rewarded with the chance to climb a viewing tower to help them get out again
- RHS Garden Rosemoor in Devon boasts more than 170 species and cultivars from the *Ilex* genus. A holly trail leads visitors around Lady Anne Berry's formal gardens and through fields and woodland, taking in diverse varieties such as the tiny-leaved *Ilex crenata* 'Dwarf Pagoda', which can even be trained as a bonsai

‘Fieldfares, redwings and thrushes flock to the scarlet fruits, with mistle thrushes fiercely guarding prized trees’



A shapely holly tree adds a welcome splash of colour to a wintry New Forest landscape

Classroom, which teaches tree ID and bushcraft skills. Evergreen foliage provides roosting shelter from harsh weather, and beneath its canopy, a dry, leaf-littered refuge attracts hibernating hedgehogs. Fieldfares, redwings and thrushes flock to the scarlet fruits, with mistle thrushes fiercely guarding prized trees. Dormice and wood mice join the feast. When spring has chased winter away, the holly's work continues. 'Holly flowers sustain pollinators,' Mr Kendall adds, 'and the aptly named holly blue butterfly lays its spring eggs on the buds and leaves.'

When food is short, large mammals will also tuck in. In the 1652 lease of Wentworth Woodhouse in what is now South Yorkshire, William Wentworth, 2nd Earl of Strafford,

even stipulated that his deer be fed 'for their better management and support, by serving them with holley to be cutt therein in winter'; and in Derbyshire, a century earlier, the feeding of holly to sheep and cattle led to a series of fines being issued to farmers for the unauthorised lopping of 'green-wood'.

The holly's fine-grained, unusually pale wood is also exceptional. Hard and strong, its uses have been varied: bobbins, whip handles, arrows, mathematical instruments and wheel shafts. It also makes excellent firewood and requires minimal coppicing. Writing in *Sylva* in 1704, 17th-century diarist and horticulturist John Evelyn enthused: 'Is there under heaven a more glorious and refreshing object of the kind, than an

impregnable hedge [of holly]... which I can shew... at any time of the year, glittering with its armed and varnished leaves.'

Although mildly poisonous, holly was once a medicine. The leaves were crushed into a poultice to treat joint pain or brewed to make tea drunk as a diuretic or for relief from cold symptoms. Whether in a tonic or in the garden, holly offered succour. As Southey notes: 'But when the bare and wintry woods we see/What then so cheerful as the Holly-tree?' In the most uplifting of all carols, we are invited to 'deck the halls' with its 'boughs'. 'Sing we joyous, all together/Heedless of the wind and weather,' exult choristers. However harsh the winter, holly brings everlasting hope. 🍷