

## The Winter Beauty of American Holly

by Michael Pollock

As one of our few native broadleaved evergreens, American holly (*Ilex opaca*) really stands out in the bare, gray forests of winter, offering wildlife shelter from cold winds, snow, and predators. Traveling towards Virginia, hollies seem more common, but small, often narrowly pyramidal or cylindrical hollies are relatively common scattered in upland forests under oaks in the Triangle, for example at Jordan Lake's Seaforth access. Hollies are found across North Carolina, and often noted in place names, such as Holly Springs. Sometimes dark green groves line small Piedmont streams, living up to their specific name, *opaca*, shaded or dark, but they have little tolerance for flooding or fire, and seem to prefer well-drained but moist soil. The genus is called *Ilex*, the Roman name for holm oak, an evergreen oak with similarly sharp leaves.



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American holly, with its alternating, oval, pointy evergreen leaves; smooth, pale bark; and red berries (technically drupes) is easy to identify, unless other hollies are around. English holly, *I. aquifolium*, has been introduced and is supposed to have glossier leaves with wavy edges, brighter berries, and doesn't grow as large. Chinese or horned holly (the meaning of *I. cornuta*) is a common landscaping plant and can spread into woodlands. It has large, shiny, very spiny hourglass-shaped or tamer shield-shaped leaves; dense foliage; many large red berries; and is a small tree. Many holly species and varieties are used in landscaping here. There are deciduous, unprickled natives, such as deciduous holly or possumhaw (*I. decidua*), often found along waterways, its bare branches festooned with clusters of festive small red berries. Others, like inkberry, have black fruit. Near the coast yaupon has smooth, evergreen leaves and red berries. Yaupon may be the only caffeinated native, and Indians began brewing its leaves for the ceremonial purgative Black Drink. Yaupon and English hollies have been substituted for tea.

Besides being very beautiful, American holly inherited traditions attached to the English holly, both having been called Christmas holly. The Romans decorated with holly for Saturnalia, a week before Christmas, but dedicated to the god Saturn, and holly was exchanged as a symbol of friendship. There was a church edict against copying Saturnalia customs, but today hollies are very associated with Christmas. Britain's druids also took holly boughs indoors, as abodes for forest spirits during the leafless winter. As a Christian symbol, the thorns signify Jesus' crown of thorns and the brilliant red berries his blood. Germans call hollies Christdorn (Christ's thorn) and hultz. Our holly comes from Old English *hollen*, not from holy, and is related to names like Holmes and Hulm. The mixed martial artist Holly Holm seems to be called holly twice. Other names for holly include French le houx, Danish stikpalme, Dutch schubbig hardkelk, Welsh celyn, and acebo in Spanish. In Latin it is *aquifolium*, meaning needle leaf, becoming *agrifolio* in

modern Italian. A Japanese word is *hiiragi*, which can be a given name, at least in fiction. Over 100 years ago people harvesting branches to sell for Christmas, often from trees they did not own, was so wanton and destructive that hollies were rare near cities, but hollies seem to be left unmolested in the quiet winter woods today.

There is a lot of Old World folklore about hollies. Custom often said it was unlucky to bring holly indoors before Christmas Eve, and if every leaf was not removed by Candlemas Eve, goblins would come out. Another tradition said holly decorations had to be removed and burned on the fire used to make Shrove Tuesday pancakes, but others prohibited burning. Hollies are sometimes used as Christmas trees. English hollies have both prickly and smooth leaves, and in Derbyshire, UK which form was brought in indicated whether the husband or wife would be in charge in the coming year. The Roman naturalist Pliny said holly offered protection against evil spells, poison, and lightning strikes, but another tradition held that taking holly into an invalid's room risked causing relapse or worse. In the European language of flowers holly signifies defense and foresight. It was said that holly could prevent a girl from becoming a witch and produced predictive dreams. Pliny also wrote that the flowers would freeze water and that throwing a piece of holly wood after an animal, compelled it to return and lie down. One book claims holly was used ceremonially by Zoroastrians, but that might refer to a different tree.

Holly is in the herbal pharmacopoeia. The berries aren't very poisonous, but 10 to 12 berries cleans out the digestive system and bladder. Leaf tea was drunk for pneumonia, measles, flu, and colds, applied to sore eyes, and put on sores and itches, while bark tea was used for malaria and epilepsy.

Hollies aren't good lumber trees, and there were taboos about cutting them, but the pale, fine grained wood has many uses and is probably the reason the species is also known as white holly. The hard wood has been used for furniture, cabinets, knife handles, turnings, walking sticks, model ships, rulers, musical instruments, and, since it polishes and dyes very well, it is used for inlaid marquetry and keys of pianos. One source says a dye can be made with the berries.

Hollies can live 150 years plus, growing up to 100' tall and 4' around, but the largest

ones I have seen, mostly around Falls Lake, were at most around 40' tall. Hollies typically grow slowly, shaded by larger trees. The seeds are supposed to lie dormant up to three years before germinating. George Washington had a lot of trouble establishing the hollies still growing at Mt. Vernon. American hollies are naturally found from East Texas and central Florida to Delaware, but ornamental varieties survived - 20°F in Ohio.

Deer turn to holly when better food is scarce, but cattle and other livestock were fed dried and bruised English holly during the winter and sticks were given to rabbits to gnaw as a tonic for appetite. Unlike humans, many birds can consume the berries, such as bobwhites, turkeys, flickers, cedar waxwings, and mockingbirds, though the fruit usually lasts for a while. Raccoons, skunks, squirrels, and white-footed mice are among the mammalian visitors. Among insects holly midges and holly pit scales feed on the fruit while tiny leafmining fly larvae tunnel in the leaves. Holly azures and Henry's elfin butterflies, along with maple spanworms, holly loopers, common pugs, ruby quakers, holly sawflies, and other moth caterpillars eat the leaves. There are also Harris' three-spot moth caterpillars, of which lepidopterist David L Wagner writes that this "strange animal...resembles a bird dropping, a spider, a pile of debris, and who knows what else." They are also unusual in pupating in chambers they carve into wood.

Hollies bear greenish flowers at the leaf bases for a few weeks around the end of spring. The flowers have 4-6 petals and each tree typically has one sex. Male flowers are in clusters of around 3-9 while female flowers are usually 1-3 in a cluster. Some species, such as English hollies, can produce nonviable unfertilized fruit by parthenocarpy. Holly is supposed to be a good nectar source for honeybees, along with native bees, yellowjackets and other wasps, ants, flies, moths, and sometimes butterflies such as spring azures, perhaps confused with very similar holly azures. The pea-sized drupes ripen to red, orange, sometimes yellow around early fall, but can remain for a year. The rich, deep green leaves, overshadowed by the daintier deciduous leaves of summer, can last three years.

*Michael Pollock is a freelance writer living in southern Durham and founded Northeast Creek Stream Watch (www.northeastcreek.org). He studied biology and anthropology at UNC.*



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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

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Is it too late to protect the wilderness character of the Refuge? No, not if we, the people, decide to boycott companies who bid on the oil and gas leases. Do you own stocks or mutual funds that invest in oil and gas development or in wind and solar power? Do you buy gasoline from Exxon Mobile and BP after their destructive oil spills? We, the people, our society, can make great differences in how we spend and invest our money. It may be the last chance we have for protecting the Refuge.

David Brower, writing in the Sierra Club's Wilderness Conference 10th Edition said "Wouldn't we be outraged if when we look up at the night sky, we know that some demigod had tip-toed through the heavens eons ago and plucked the best stars for itself." Well, in our heaven, are we going to let the gods of industry take our wilderness or are we going to do something about it?

*Joe Jacob, a Chatham resident for more than 30 years and a marine biologist by training, is president The Haw River Canoe & Kayak Co., www.hawrivercanoe.com, 336.260.6465. He worked for The Nature Conservancy for 20 years and served as Director of Science for TNC's Southeast Region.*

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