

## Tree of the Month

### Holly

Month: 09/07 to 05/08



Holly is native to the UK and scattered remains of the once extensive holly forests may still be found on The South Downs and Dartmoor. It is slow growing initially and can live for 300 years, reaching a height of about 15m. The tough, oval, leaves are shiny green (reflecting sunlight like a mirror), heavily lobed, and spikey. At higher levels, and as the tree ages, the leaves become less prickly, ending up smooth edged with a spike at the tip. The flowers, which appear in May, are white with four petals. The female flower is slightly larger than the male and they grow on different trees. After pollination



by insects; the female produces red berries during August and September that are poisonous to humans. The berries are eaten by Thrushes, Finches, and Field-fares, which can be heard guarding 'their' tree with great energy!

The dense foliage and prickly leaves provide safe cover for nesting birds, and the leaves may be eaten by moth and butterfly caterpillars. The leaves stay on the tree for 3 to 4 years and are slow to decay when they fall, building up a dense under-layer and providing good cover for hibernating hedgehogs and small mammals.

The heavy, hard, and fine-grained holly-wood is the whitest of all woods, resembling ivory. It is used to make coachman's whips, walking sticks and knife handles and, when stained (black-stained Holly is known as poor man's ebony), for marquetry and engraving. It burns hot and well and makes good firewood, so was popular with weapon makers and smiths.

With its dense, prickly, leaves Holly forms a good, solid, barrier and makes an excellent hedge that can be trimmed and shaped.

Most of Holly's healing powers are on the subtle plain and it has been used to assist in meditation and ease feelings of aggressiveness, jealousy, irritability, hatred, and suspicion. An infusion of holly leaves may be used to treat coughs, influenza, rheumatism, and fevers. Leaves soaked in vinegar and placed on corns for a day and a night was said to cure them, while chilblains were thrashed with a holly branch to 'chase the chill out'. Sniffing the juice of holly leaves was reputed to stop a runny cold. The berries make a strong purgative and are poisonous.

The Holly was especially sacred to the druids and its lustrous evergreen leaves have represented immortality to mystics of all ages. Bringing holly into the home would shelter the elves and faeries as winter set in, but it had to be removed by Imbolc Eve (31 January) as any green in the house after that foretold a misfortune. In later year's Christian interpretation of this ancient custom appointed Twelfth Night for the removal of green foliage (and latterly Christmas decorations). The druids recognised that bringing holly into the home, with its red berries and light reflecting leaves, lifted spirits during the dark days of winter. Holly has long been regarded as a plant of good omen and people grew it near their homes to protect them from evil spirits. A holly leaf hung on the outside of the entrance door after Twelfth Night would protect the home from misfortune.

The Holly King and Oak King (like the Greenman/Wildman concept) were said to divide the year between them, with the Holly ruling during the decline of the year (from midsummer to midwinter) while the Oak ruled during the ascendancy (from midwinter to midsummer) so between them they represent the god of Nature who protects and loves the earth-goddess, bringing fruitfulness to the land. This ancient symbolism was so strong that the Church was unable to eradicate it and mummers' plays evolved using festive characters to veil the sacred lore. These often involved a battle between 'good' and 'evil' to win the hand of a 'fair maiden' (the earth-goddess). After midsummer the Holly would win while, after midwinter the Oak would gain the maid!

Tradition says that no branch should be cut from Holly, but 'it should be pulled free in a method considered fit for a sacred tree', and felling, burning or burying green-skinned Holly has long been considered unlucky. If smooth leafed holly (she-holly) entered the home before spikey leafed holly (he-holly) at Yuletide, then the wife would rule the husband the coming year. If he-holly came in first the husband would rule! If a man carried a holly leaf or berry on him; he would become attractive to women.