

Herbal Tea to Christmas Greenery: The History of Holly

When most people think of holly, they think of decorative Christmas greenery. This use is quite common, but the holly plant has a rich history and many unique uses.

Holly grows mainly in North America, Europe, and Asia, and takes the form of a shrub or tree anywhere from six feet to over a hundred feet high. There are about four hundred species and most hollies are evergreens, meaning the leaves stay on year round. The characteristic leaves are green, pointed, and sharp, and the berries a bright red. The berries - only produced by the female plants - serve as food for many birds, but are toxic to humans.

Although scientific proof of its effectiveness is lacking, the leaves of holly have been used for ages as an herbal remedy for dizziness, fever, and other conditions. Herbal tea can be made from the holly plant, in fact, the Guayusa species has the highest caffeine content of any plant. The wood of the holly plant is unique as well - it is quite hard and very pale in color. It can be used for white chess pieces, inlays in furniture, or when dyed black to resemble ebony, made into piano keys.

Holly is considered special by many cultures because like real Christmas trees, even in the dead of winter its leaves stay healthy, shiny, and strong. No matter how cold or dreary, the berries remain a bold red. Celtic mythology has many references to holly and the ancient Druids hung holly from doorways and in windows to ward off witches and evil spirits. The Romans used holly to honor Saturn, the god of agriculture (interestingly, the Christmas holiday was modeled on the festival Saturnalia).

Because of the superstitions surrounding holly, early Christians were forbidden to decorate with it, but as time went on holly gained significance. Holly can be used to signify the birth of Christ, like in the Christmas carol, "The Holly and the Ivy." In Germany, holly is called "Eichdorn," meaning "Christ thorn," in memory of Christ's crown. Legend says that holly berries used to be white, but when the prickly crown of holly was placed on Christ's head, they were permanently stained red by the blood of Christ. Another legend tells the story of an orphan boy who was with the shepherds when they went to visit the newborn Jesus. The little boy had no gift for Christ so he wove a crown from the holly branches. When he presented it to Christ he was ashamed by the modesty of the gift and began to cry. Christ touched the crown and turned the boy's tears into bright red berries.

Nowadays, holly is common Christmas greenery used for decoration around the holidays. A Christmas holly wreath can have special religious significance, or simply be a beautiful display of the colors of Christmas. A hearty plant, it can be displayed both indoors and out.

Holly has a rich history and many unique uses. Its berries are food for the birds, and its leaves can be made into a tea for humans. You can find the wood of holly on a chess board or even a piano. In whole, holly can make a special holiday decoration to bring the joy of Christmas to your home.

About the Author

Helen Walker. At ChristmasFarms.com choose your own freshly-cut real Christmas trees, [holly wreath](#), or other [Christmas greenery](#) to bring the spirit of the holiday directly to your home or office.

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