

Hollies for Year-round Beauty

November is the month when hollies are recognized for the treasures they are. Even on days when grey branches against grey skies predominate, the rich green of the native hollies brighten the scene. And when the sun reflects off holly leaves, the picture sparkles.

Appreciated for being essential for holiday greenery, their distinctive beauty has been marked through centuries of folklore and legend. The *Ilex* genus is found world wide except for Antarctica (and let's pray that never happens) and more than twenty are native to North America. Among the legends, leaves from one of the native hollies, *Ilex vomitoria* was used by the Indians to brew a stimulating drink. The name might suggest it was also used as an emetic. Another tea made from *I. paraguariensis*, native to Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, is widely available as Yerba mate, a tonic supposed to fend off nausea I am told. It is also considered one of the "caffeine hollies" so may be a stimulant as well.

Rather than to make tea, most hollies are cherished because they are evergreen, providing garden structure when other shrubs lose their leaves. Because of their widely differing characteristics, species from America, England, China and Japan have been interbred to produce hundreds of cultivars. The ornamental value of these hybrids is indisputable, but for important wildlife food and habitat the natives are best.

The American Holly, *I. opaca*, has the spiny leaves that make both gloves and kneepads essential when you work near them. Other natives are kinder. The Inkberry (Gallberry) Holly, *I. glabra*, has smooth, slim, rounded leaves and the expected black berries. It is stoloniferous and makes a fine hedge, eight to ten feet at maturity but can be kept lower by pruning. The swamp and salt water-tolerant Youpon holly, *I. vomitoria*, has small indented leaves. Attractive grey-white bark makes this a pretty specimen, especially in the weeping cultivars. It is both heat and drought tolerant.

Also spineless are the leaves that leave, those of the deciduous Winterberry Holly, *I. verticillata*. This small tree is a delight when the bare branches are sheathed in red berries. One of the most adaptable of native deciduous hollies is *I. decidua*, the Possumhaw. It is a large shrub, small tree with smooth glossy foliage and red berries. Incidentally, not all holly berries are red. The evergreen Dahoon Holly, *I. cassine* has red or yellow berries on a small 20 to 30 ft. tree with long slim leaves.

Hollies are indeed familiar which can be explained by their landscape usefulness and ease of cultivation. They have earned their laurels!

Environmental note: This is an idea whose time should never have come! When I read that an oil billionaire had plans to drain the Ogallala Aquifer to sell water to hot, dry Texans, I could not believe it. We have read of the poor in other countries who could no longer afford water once corporations had bought public water supplies and raised the price. In the US we rely on local governments to make sure we can drink and flush. According to the experts, 90% of community water systems meet all health requirements.

Historically, this has been different. Since we weren't around in the 19th Century, we may not know that water supplies were privatized for profit in several large cities. The results were disastrous with disease outbreaks and fire hoses too limp to fight a fire. When the 20th Century rolled around several city governments such as those in Baltimore, New York, and New Orleans took over the responsibility of providing water. History is a great teacher: New York City took

over its water supply from a bank and holding company after 3500 people died in an epidemic of waterborne disease.

As even the best water systems need upgrades over time, there is always the temptation to let corporate interests take over rather than pressing the community for funds to maintain this asset. Sounds like a good deal and even might be if the offer came from Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy instead of an entity established for the intent and purpose of increasing profitability.

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