

Ilex Opaca American Holly

Illustration by F.A. Michaux, 1934



With Boughs of Holly

With their bright red berries and contrasting dark evergreen foliage, holly is a welcome sight on a cold winter's day when there is not a lot of color in sight. Sprigs of jolly holly have a long history as a symbolic seasonal winter's holiday tradition. While other deciduous trees shed their leaves, the evergreen holly keeps its dark green leaves throughout the winter and remains beautiful. This feature made holly a sacred tree of the ancient Druids, who used boughs of holly to decorate entrances to homes. The ceremonial placing of a plant above a doorway is an ancient practice common to many cultures and periods. The placing of a ring of holly on doors originated in Ireland, as holly was one of the plants that was green at this time of the year, when the drab winter days were short, and nights in the cold, dark winter were long. The red-berried holly was a symbol of cheer, warmth, and the coming of the light.



The early Romans decorated their homes, particularly the fireplace, with holly during the celebration of the Winter Solstice, the shortest day of the year. As the days followed, they knew the sunlight would show itself a little more each day, and they merrily celebrated “coming out of the darkness”. Holly was believed to offer protection from misfortunes such as lightning and evil spirits entering through the chimney. The prickles on the end of the leaves were thought to snag the evil spirits. Besides decorating with the colorful plant, the Romans gave Holly as gifts to their friends and loved ones.

Ilex, the only genus in the family Aquifoliaceae, includes over 400 species commonly known as holly. *Ilex aquifolium*, commonly called English holly, is native to Europe, western Asia, and north Africa. *Ilex aquifolium* is the holly most people think of when they picture holly, with its glossy, spiny, dark leaves, and bright red fruit. *Ilex opaca* is native to the United States from Massachusetts to Florida, and west to Missouri and Texas. In Massachusetts, it grows to be a smaller tree, 20 to 30 feet tall. The stiff evergreen leaves are 1 ½ - 3 ½ inches long with spines along the margin. The name *opaca* in Latin means opaque: shaded, the reverse of shining, and describes the duller sheen of the leaves and fruit on the American holly compared to the English holly.

Holly is a dioecious plant. This means there are both male and female plants. In order for the female plants to grow bright, red berries every year, it must be located within 30 to 40 feet of a male so it can be pollinated. The male provides the pollen, and the female bears the fruit. Without a male nearby, the female will grow, but won't produce berries.

Birds and other wildlife eat holly berries in the wintertime when their food supplies are low. Wild turkey, quail, white-tailed deer, squirrels, and many songbirds including mockingbirds, cardinals, mourning doves, robins, cedar waxwings, goldfinches, and bobwhites will feed on the berries (botanically known as drupes) They also use the densely packed, spiny, shrubby branches to provide winter shelter.

