

Holly

The Holly (*Ilex*) genus consists of more than 400 species. Hollies offer a diverse range of plant characteristics. They can be deciduous or evergreen and vary from small (18 inches) to very large (over 50 feet).

Landscape Use

Smaller hollies are attractive as [foundation plantings](#) or low hedges. Larger evergreen hollies make attractive, impenetrable tall hedges or screens.

Cultivation

Most hollies require well-drained soil that is rich in organic matter and slightly acid. All appreciate mulch to deter weeds and keep the soil moist and cool. Hollies will grow in sun or part shade, but for the best berry production and most compact growth choose a sunny spot. Some hollies are self-fertilizing, but others are exclusively female and need a male plant nearby for pollination. Check with your nursery owner about whether the hollies you are buying need both male and female plants to set fruit.

Containerized plants can be set out at any time, but early fall is best.

Problems

[Poor fruiting](#) on hollies is a problem experienced by many gardeners. This could be due to poor pollination; young, immature plants; high nitrogen levels in the soil; or a late spring frost which injured the flowers.

Common pests on hollies are scale, bud moth, red mites and leafminers. Root rot diseases are a problem with several Japanese cultivars.

Species

The Japanese hollies (*Ilex crenata*): The Japanese hollies are evergreen shrubs with relatively small, spineless leaves and black fruit. They are usually 3 to 10 feet high, with a similar spread and look more like a boxwood than a holly. They range from slow-growing to relatively fast-growing, and are a good choice for hedges. Japanese hollies tolerate severe pruning.

Many cultivars are available. Some of them are:

- ‘Helleri’ is a compact form, which reaches 4 feet at maturity.
- ‘Convexa’ has dark-green leaves, is a heavy fruit producer and may reach 9 feet tall and 24 feet wide.
- ‘Hetzii’ is a dwarf form of ‘Convexa’ and grows 2 to 3 feet in height.
- ‘Roundleaf’ is a male selection that does not produce berries. Plants grow 5 to 10 feet tall and 5 to 12 feet wide.



‘Helleri’ Japanese holly growing as a high groundcover or mass planting. Karen Russ, ©2007 HGIC, Clemson Extension

The Chinese hollies (*Ilex cornuta*): The Chinese hollies produce large, spiny leaves that are very glossy and dark green in color. Most Chinese hollies grow quite large, 10 to 15 feet. They are one of the few hollies that produce berries without pollination.

- ‘Burfordii’ or Burford holly grows to 20 feet tall and wide. The heavy fruit set attracts many birds.
- ‘Rotunda’ or Dwarf Chinese holly grows only to 3 to 4 feet tall and 6 to 8 feet wide. Plants usually do not produce berries.
- ‘Berries Jubilee’ is a dome-shaped plant, 6 to 10 feet tall, with large leaves and a heavy crop of large, bright red berries.



American holly on the corner of a screen planting.
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American Holly (*Ilex opaca*): American holly is the traditional Christmas holly with large, spiny green leaves and bright red berries. American hollies grow into trees to 50 feet tall. Many cultivars exist. Among the best known are:

- ‘Dan Fenton’ has large, glossy leaves.
- ‘Jersey Delight’ and ‘Jersey Princess’; ‘Jersey Knight’ is the male pollen source.

- ‘Merry Christmas’ with glossy, deep green leaves and red berries.
- ‘Stewart’s Silver Crown’ with leaves edged in cream and marbled with gray green.
- ‘Yellow Berry’ with bright yellow berries.

English holly (*Ilex aquifolium*): English holly is an evergreen tree with very spiny, glossy foliage and bright red berries. Cultivars with white variegated leaf margins are very distinctive. English hollies dislike poor drainage and low temperatures. Their growth rate is quite slow.

Yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*): Yaupon holly is native from Long Island, New York to central Florida and west to Texas. In South Carolina it grows into a small evergreen tree, 3 to 15 feet tall and 3 to 10 feet wide. Female plants produce small red berries in large clusters. New growth has a purplish tinge, which turns dark green. Yaupon Holly tolerates wind and hot climates better than most evergreen hollies. Some cultivars are:

- ‘Nana’ or ‘Dwarf Yaupon Holly,’ a small, moundlike shrub, 3 to 5 feet high and very broad;
- ‘Pendula’, a weeping type, reaching 15 to 20 feet with beautiful fruit.



The berries of yaupon holly are especially bright.
Joey Williamson, ©2007 HGIC, Clemson Extension

Possumhaw (*Ilex deciduas*): Possumhaw is a deciduous small tree, 6 to 10 feet tall, with dark green, 3-inch leaves and orange to red berries, which last into winter or spring.

Inkberry (*Ilex glabra*): Inkberry is an evergreen shrub, to 10 feet tall, with thick, spineless leaves and black berries. The dwarf form 'Compacta' grows to 4 feet, but can be sheared to make a 2-foot hedge.



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The fine texture of inkberry makes it a good substitute for boxwood. Karen Russ, ©2007 HGIC, Clemson Extension

Lusterleaf Holly (*Ilex latifolia*): Lusterleaf is a slow-growing evergreen tree, to 30 feet tall. Leaves are 6 to 8 inches long (largest of all hollies).



Joey Williamson, ©2007 HGIC, Clemson Extension

Lusterleaf holly has the largest leaves of all hollies. Joey Williamson, ©2007 HGIC, Clemson Extension

Meserve Holly (*Ilex meserveae*): Meserve holly is a 6- to 7-foot, evergreen shrub that is very cold hardy.

Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*): Winterberry is a deciduous shrub, which unlike most hollies thrives in boggy soils. Plants grow 6 to 10 feet tall and female plants bear enormous crops of bright red berries that last all winter.



Joey Williamson, ©2007 HGIC, Clemson Extension

Even young winterberry hollies bear abundant bright berries. Joey Williamson, ©2007 HGIC, Clemson Extension

'Nellie R. Stevens' Holly: 'Nellie R. Stevens' is a cross between English and Chinese holly. This fast-growing cultivar has excellent dark green foliage and large, red berries and makes an excellent specimen tree.

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