

Yard and Garden – 12-17-2011 – Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

*We wish you a Merry Christmas,
We wish you a Merry Christmas,
We wish you a Merry Christmas, and a Happy New Year!*

With Christmas soon to arrive, I continue to sing this tune. However, allow me to pause for a moment while I ask you to think back.

You may recall that during the last week in November, daytime temperatures continued to reach the fifties and occasionally the sixties. Autumn weather prevailed. Many deciduous trees and shrubs still held their leaves. It seemed like a daily chore; one could find me in my yard running the leaf vacuum, shredding leaves. Winter seemed so very far away. Then it happened. December arrived and with it, everything changed.

The landscape is now a winter wonderland. Snow has now fallen and most of the leaves are gone or buried in the snow. Christmas is upon us! People are busy putting up Christmas trees, decorating their homes and shopping for gifts.

While helping Rita carry down our Christmas tree and other decorations from the attic, I noticed that many of our wreaths and garlands are adorned with red berries. It was then I contemplated how berries play an essential role in Christmas traditions. Some hold religious significance, some are simply for décor; and others are used in holiday cuisine.



Holly, one of those berries, is undoubtedly the most popular Christmas berry. Many stories explain its significance. While Christianity was not the first to use holly in decorating, it does hold symbolic meaning. In general, the blood red color of the berries symbolizes Christ's crucifixion, and a wreath made of holly branches symbolizes the thorny crown worn by Christ when he was crucified. Today, perhaps more practical than symbolic, holly, because of its sheer beauty, is

widely used in an assortment of Christmas decorations.

Another berry tied closely to Christmas tradition is the cranberry. Although a popular component in holiday dinners, cranberries, like holly berries, with their beautiful red color have traditionally become part of Christmas décor. Cranberries are frequently strung with popcorn to create Christmas tree garlands. A kissing ball covered with mistletoe (yet another Christmas berry) and adorned with bright red cranberries is a sure way to liven up the season and get people smooching.

Consider the less popular lingonberry. Lingonberries are closely related to cranberries. They have a tart flavor and are frequently used in jams and pies. This bright red berry is a holiday favorite used mostly in Scandinavian cuisine. Being of German decent, it was not until my mother remarried years after my father had passed away that I became familiar with lingonberry. My stepfather, Clayton England, a wonderful man, was one hundred percent Swedish. When he was a child, his mother traditionally made a Christmas dish using lingonberries called ostakaka. After Mother and Clayton married, Mom continued his family tradition. Along with cranberries, lingonberries then became a part of our family's Christmas dinner.

I realize many other berries also play a role in Christmas traditions. Today, I have only touched upon three. However, continuing the Christmas spirit, I need to dash. Rita beckons me to quit daydreaming and get back to helping her with the decorating. As I deck the halls with boughs of holly, I will continue to sing, but this time with slightly altered lyrics.

*I wish you a Berry Christmas,
I wish you a Berry Christmas,
I wish you a Berry Christmas, and a Happy New Year!*