

**Yard and Garden – 12-12-09 – Ted Griess/ Extension Horticulture Assistant**

Deck the halls with boughs of holly — Fa la la la la, la la la la.

Christmas is fast approaching, and this seasonal tune is streaming the airwaves. One day while singing along, I began to wonder why, where, and when, did using holly to deck the halls originate.

While delving deeper, I discovered that *Deck the Halls* is an old Welch tune, dating back to the sixteenth century. It is claimed to be originally derived from an ancient pagan winter carol called *Nos Galen*. I soon realized that decorating with holly is an ancient custom. Determining exactly why, where or when seemed impossible; however, I did learn a few tidbits.



The use of holly at Christmas time has deep religious meaning. The greenery symbolizes Christ's crown of thorns and its sharp pointed leaves represent his wounds; the red berries represent his blood.

Interestingly, however, using holly is also tied to pagan customs. In ancient times, the Druids placed sprigs of holly in windows and over doorways. The spiked points on the ends of holly leaves were believed to ward off witches and evil spirits.

No matter what its history, decorating our homes with holly and other live greenery for Christmas

remains a popular tradition. Today, as in years past, decorating with greenery adds to the festivity of the season.

Although holly is an excellent greenery choice, an assortment of others from which to choose exists. They include pine, cedar, fir, juniper, boxwood, spruce, arborvitae, hemlock, and yew. In addition to using evergreens, consider using other parts of plants such as dried flowers, seed pods, cones and berries, all of which add texture and contrasting interest.

One word of caution — the green needles and red berries of yews are poisonous. It is best to use this greenery outdoors, or if used indoors, keep it away from children and pets. Furthermore, when discarding yew greenery, avoid disposing where livestock might feed upon it.

One might ask, "Where can one find the best greenery?" Although it is readily available at most garden centers this time of year, consider gathering Christmas greenery from one's own home landscape. This method will ensure freshness at little or no cost.

Gathering live greenery from one's shrubs and trees can be accomplished by selective pruning. Carefully consider what branches to remove before cutting. Avoid harvesting too much greenery from

one particular plant. Use clean, sharp shears and distribute the cuts evenly throughout the plant to preserve its natural form and beauty.

Keeping greenery fresh is extremely important. Crush the ends of cut stems and immediately place them in water. Until the greenery is ready to use, store the cuttings in a cool location and out of direct sunlight. It is generally a good practice to immerse the greenery in water overnight before arranging. This practice allows for maximum water uptake, thus keeping the greenery supple and fresh longer. One can also spray the greenery with an anti-transpirant, such as *Wilt-pruf*, to seal in moisture.

Greenery can be displayed in many ways. One is encouraged to use one's imagination; however, garlands, swags, and wreaths are the most common arrangements.

Always decorate for safety. Never place fresh greenery near candles, fireplaces or other heat sources. It's a good practice to check the decorations often to make certain they remain supple and fresh. Dried greenery is extremely flammable.

In the meantime I'll continue to sing, but this time it will be, "Deck the halls and even the walls with fresh Christmas greenery to brighten the scenery — Fa, la la la la, la la la la."