

*Deck the halls with boughs of Ilex, Fa-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la.*

I find it amazing how one word can change a song. Everyone knows that in the lyrics of the popular Christmas song listed above, the word should be holly not *ilex* (eye-lex). After all, holly rhymes with jolly, so why did I choose to use the word *ilex* instead of holly?

I did so because *Ilex* is actually the genus name for all holly plants, and this genus is comprised of well over seven hundred evergreen species and thirty deciduous species. Holly trees and shrubs are found growing native in North and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa and Australia. Perhaps, because of its worldly distribution, holly became a popular plant, especially at Christmas. I will share more about that later.

If one were to examine a dictionary for the definition of holly, the description might read something like, *any tree or shrub of the genus Ilex having red berries and shiny evergreen leaves with prickly edges*. Sorry to say, that description is too brief and not very accurate. Hollies grow as far north as USDA hardiness Zone 4 and as far south as Zone 11. Hollies are one of the few genera grown in all fifty states. They range in size from a six-inch-tall, spreading shrub to a seventy foot-tall towering tree. The leaves of holly may be small and spineless or large and armed. Berries can be red, orange, yellow, or black. One unique feature of all hollies is they are dioecious—either male or female plants. Only females produce berries and a male plant must grow within thirty to forty feet of a female for good fruit production. Most hollies prefer full sun and well-drained, slightly acidic soils.

Having lived in central Nebraska for the better share of my life, I rarely recall seeing holly shrubs or trees growing in the landscape. That is for two reasons. Most species of holly do not survive below Zone 6, and most prefer acidic soils. It is nearly impossible to find either of these two growing requirements in central Nebraska; however, a few varieties of holly are capable of growing in our area with reasonable success.



Nearly thirty years ago, I planted *Ilex meserveae*. This hybrid species grows well in colder climates. I can safely say it is hardy in Zone 5. Its common name is either China Boy (male) or China Girl (female). The China series are slow growing, evergreen shrubs. They have shiny, prickly leaves and are capable of producing red berries. Because of their slow growth

pattern, the China series grows well as foundation plantings. Since we regularly take cuttings from our holly during this time of year to deck our halls, it remains close to three feet in height.

The following is what I discovered about how holly became synonymous with Christmas.

According to Dr. Leonard Perry, an Extension Professor at the University of Vermont, "Decking the halls with holly is an ancient custom several thousand years old. The ancient Romans, Greeks, and Druids all decorated their homes with this plant. The Druids of pre-Roman Britain believed that holly was a sacred tree never deserted by the sun. That belief stemmed from the fact that holly growing in a deciduous forest remained green all winter long. The Romans considered holly to be a symbol of good will and sent wreaths of it to newlyweds as a token of good wishes and congratulations. The Europeans, and especially the English, decorated with English holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) during the Christmas season. Decorating with holly--a word many scholars believe is a corruption of the words "holy tree" --- is how it became associated with the Christmas season."

In closing, I will return to singing, '*Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly*' and as for you, '*Have a Holly, Jolly, Christmas!*'