

One of the noble trees of the Southern forest is the American holly. It is revered by the horticulturists as a feature of landscape plantings. It is beloved by the birdwatchers as a wonderful source of bird food in late winter. It is sought after by beekeepers as a source of honey for their bee hives. Wildlife people are fond of seeing their evergreen leaves as a refuge for the animals and so the praises go on and on.

Only children who go barefoot in the summer hate a holly tree in their yard. The spines of the leaves are painful to small bare feet. In short, the holly tree is known and appreciated by just about all who have seen it, especially a well-berried tree in the Christmas season. Just what would the Christmas season be without holly? Perhaps the green leaves and bright red berries have contributed to the common usage as green and red being the Christmas colors.

The American holly is *Ilex opaca*. It is found as a natural plant in almost every Louisiana parish. It grows well in the bottomlands along the major and minor streams. That is where most of the larger trees are found. It is equally at home on upland sandy soils. In a few words, it is found almost everywhere.

Holly wood is one of the whitest woods known and was eagerly sought by cabinet makers, piano manufacturers, and makers of the early wooden Venetian blinds. The wood is lightweight, easily worked, does not splinter and takes stains well.

Hollies are more eagerly sought now as horticultural specimens in gardens and parks. All hollies are dioecious, that is, male or female plants. The flowers are either staminate (pollen-producing) or Pistillate (berry or seed producing). It is the pistillate (female) tree that is so admired for its winter berries. Red berries are the usual color thought of as "the" color of ripe berries, but there are also yellow and orange berried forms of American holly.

Holly trees are slow growing and difficult to transplant after they become two or three feet tall. That is the reason so few are seen in yards and why they are often expensive native trees. They take shearing quite well after they have become established and will grow in full sun to moderate shade. There are quite a few differences in the leaf texture and the color brightness of the berries. The fact that they make small to moderate trees means they should be given plenty of growing space when planting. Small trees, suitable for planting from the woods have such an irregular shape that they should be potted and sheared when growing in early spring for best effect. The leaves are moderately dense and green. The sex of young trees is unknown until they bloom. Their blossoms are small, white, four-petalled affairs that drop as a complete unit. The male blossoms have four stamens. The female blossoms have a central green ovary with a pistil attached that produces the berry.

As previously stated, American hollies are difficult to transplant except as small seedling and those are usually poorly shaped. The best way to look at planting a holly is that you are planting one for the children--if you are young--or for the grandchildren if you are younger.

The Florida parishes have strains of the small myrtle-leaved holly, which is spineless. It is perhaps the loveliest of all to most botanists and horticulturists. Get it if you can! It should be hardy anywhere in Louisiana where it is not in dry, full sun. There is so much to enjoy in Louisiana that while growing things is work, it is very satisfactory work.

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