

# Archives

## CUTTINGS; The Rise of the Holly in North America

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"DECK the halls with boughs of holly," the old yuletide song goes. Down through the ages civilizations as diverse as the Roman, Druid and American -- from colonists to today -- have done just that to color festivities during dark December days.

The Romans sent holly branches sporting lustrous evergreen leaves and bright red berries as goodwill tokens during their feast of Saturnalia. The Druids held the plant to be a sacred refuge for woodland spirits. Branches were cut and brought indoors during winter to protect these spirits from cold weather. Many believe that the word holly derives from this belief and is a corruption of the word holy.

By the time the Pilgrims were ready to set sail for America, holly branches had become an integral party of Christmas celebrations throughout Europe. The branches were largely cut from a tree known as English holly (*Ilex aquifolium*).

Even if they had brought such a nonessential plant with them, the Pilgrims would have quickly discovered that English holly is not hardy in areas where winter temperatures regularly dip below minus 5 degrees. Nor does it thrive where winter lows remain above 15 degrees.

Fortunately for those wishing to carry on old country holiday

traditions, a close cousin of the English holly is native to a wide area of North America, from Massachusetts south to Florida and west to Missouri and Texas. It too is an evergreen tree with red winter berries and it was quickly dubbed American holly (*Ilex opaca*).

During this country's first 200 years, American holly boughs were freely cut in the wild to decorate homes during winter holidays. But, by the late 1920's, stands of the plant had been decimated throughout much of its growing range.

This prompted two responses. The first led to commercial production of hollies for Christmas decorations. The second led to plant lovers amassing American holly collections. Among these were two residents of central New Jersey, Elizabeth White, who lived in Whitesbog, just south of Fort Dix, who is primarily known for promoting blueberries as a viable commercial crop; and Judge Thomas Brown, who named his property in the Locust section of Middletown Township Holly Hill.

Two decades later, in the 1940's, a group of New Jersey nurserymen and holly enthusiasts decided the American holly was not so much an endangered species but rather a neglected species, one that should be more widely used in public and private landscapes rather than confined to a holiday decoration.

With the support of the Holly Society of America, these individuals began collecting every American holly cultivar growing in New Jersey, plus selecting any promising remaining candidates in the wild and transporting them all to the Rutgers Gardens in New Brunswick. Miss White's and Judge Brown's

selections were among those that made the trip.

There were hollies with warm green leaves, hollies with yellow berries and hollies with tight, dense form. The goal was to create a showcase where nurserymen and landscape architects could see one of each form and decide which ones they would like to propagate or use.

In the process, the Gardens became home to one of the world's largest collections of American hollies. And, through a benign policy of neglect due to financing problems and other factors, the Gardens also inadvertently came to demonstrate that the American holly is one tough plant, a woody ornamental that can survive decades of absolutely no care.

As Patrick J. Cullina, associate director of the Gardens, explained in a recent interview, the scenery at the Gardens became especially noteworthy with the arrival of Dr. Elwin R. Orton at the university's department of plant science in the 1960's. Dr. Orton, famous for his breeding work in developing the beautiful Rutgers hybrid dogwoods, also breeds hollies. He took a look around at the numerous cultivars and selections on the Rutgers grounds and began crossing them back and forth.

His aim was to introduce American hollies that had the darker green and glossier foliage found on English hollies as well as larger and more profuse berries. He named one of his more spectacular introductions Jersey Princess. And a princess it is indeed, with glossy foliage that is the darkest green of any known American holly and abundant red fruit. One of its parents is now called Jersey Knight but was simply tagged Brown #9 when it

was transplanted from the judge's property to the Garden's grounds in 1945.

Dr. Orton also cast his eye at other holly collections in the Gardens. These include a sizable number of evergreen English hollies, as well as many beautiful forms of another native, the non-evergreen Winterberry (*I. verticillata*) and its close relative, the Japanese Winterberry (*I. serrata*).

Working with evergreen English and American hollies, Dr. Orton has introduced genetic dwarfs known as the Jersey Pigmy Group. These are just now entering commercial trade and are handsome plants for small gardens.

Dr. Orton's breeding efforts with non-evergreen hollies, which feature winter clusters of red or orange berries on bare branches, has led to outstanding shrubs. Among these are two hybrids of the American and Japanese winterberries. Autumn Glow has orange fall foliage and red fruits, and Harvest Red, an award winning shrub, features elegant purple fall foliage and large, lustrous red fruits.

All these plants and more can be seen at the stunning collections at The Rutgers Gardens. After you've finished decking your halls, you may wish to take a winter stroll through its grounds, open daily from dawn to dusk. (For directions, visit the Web site at <http://rutgersgardens.rutgers.edu/nj/> or call 732-932-8451.)

Mr. Cullina reports that the holly display is glorious from November through February. He particularly recommends a stroll after a light dusting of snow.

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