

Common Name: Holly

Scientific Name: *Ilex aquifolium*

Family: *Aquifoliaceae*

Alternative Names: European Holly

Range: Throughout British Isles

Habitat: Woodland, scrub and hedgerows, especially in oak and beech woodland

Key Identification Features: Evergreen tree up to 15 m tall. Dark green, shiny oval leaves with spines, particularly on young growth and on leaves closer to the ground. Higher leaves are often completely spine free. Smoothish grey/brown bark becoming gnarled with age, often with small brown bumps. The tree is dioecious with both male and female trees producing small white flowers with four petals in May. On the female tree these will develop into small green berries which will not ripen and turn red until the following year.

Confusion Species: Unlikely to be confused with any other species. Lots of cultivated forms exist with very variable leaf colour and structure.

Edible Uses: The leaves are sometimes used to make a tea. The berries are toxic in large quantities particularly to children and certainly not regarded as edible.

Medicinal Uses: Contains caffeine and caffeine derivatives. The dried leaves used as an infusion for a variety of ailments including fever, rheumatism and digestive issues as well as to treat hypertension and for better arterial function and blood circulation.

Other Uses: The wood contains a natural waxy substance which makes it burn well even when green, the original Christmas Yule log was holly. It is a white, dense, heavy and fine grained wood which polishes well and has been used for furniture and inlays and is great for carving but has an unpleasant smell when green. It often produces good straight shoots which make good walking sticks. It can be used as a drill in the fire bow and also works well as the bearing block.

The long, flexible young growth can be used for weaving baskets.

A large holly tree has a very dense, waterproof canopy therefore providing natural shelter in a downpour. The leaves themselves rot down very slowly and you can often find dead, dry leaf skeletons under the tree giving you ample kindling for a small fire.

The leaves are eaten by deer and livestock particularly in winter and the ripe berries are liked by song birds and small mammals. It is also host to the Holly Blue Butterfly and several species of moth.

Historically the tree has been seen as a fertility symbol and bringing holly into the house at Christmas is linked to the re-birth of the sun at the winter solstice. It was also meant to act as a charm against witches. It is still used to decorate homes and make wreaths at Christmas











References:

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