

# HOLLY *Ilex aquifolium*

LATIN EXPLANATION. *Ilex*; from the old Latin name *ilex*. *Ak-we-fo-le-um*, old name, meaning pointed leaves.

**HEIGHT** - An evergreen tree capable of reaching over 20m (65ft), but usually seen to around 10m (30ft).

**SOIL TYPE** - Holly tolerates a wide range of soil types. It is found on clay, peat, shale, sand, gravels and chalk.

**HABITAT** - As a native tree or shrub it is usually found as part of the shrub layer of woodland, but also as isolated trees in hedgerows, river banks and rocky outcrops.

**SHAPE** - The dark green leathery and glossy leaves are wavy edged with spiny teeth, most markedly so when the tree is young. On some older trees, or those growing in dense shade, the leaves may become smooth edged except for the terminal spiny point.

**ASSOCIATED SPECIES** - Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), aspen (*Populus tremula*), downy birch (*Betula pubescens*), goat willow (*Salix caprea*), hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), hazel (*Corylus avellana*), pedunculate oak (*Quercus robur*), sessile oak (*Quercus petraea*).

**DISTRIBUTION** - Holly is found throughout most of the Ireland and Britain up to a height of about 350m (1,100ft).

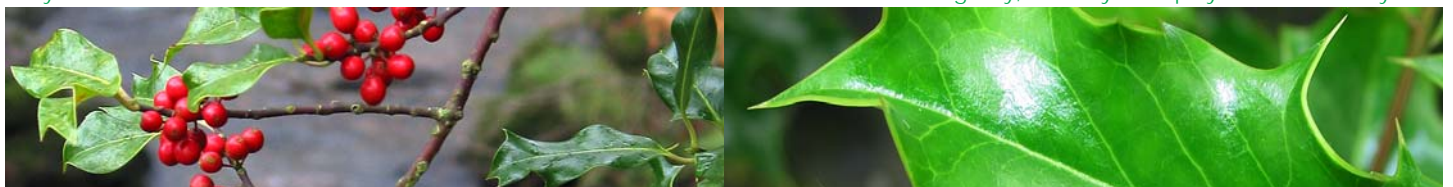
**FLOWERS & SEEDS** - The flowers are fragrant. Male and female flowers are borne on separate trees. They open in May, have four white petals and are carried in small clusters from the axils of the leaves (where they join the stem). For good fruiting, one male must be planted for every five females to ensure pollination. The berries ripen in early winter and in most years are soon taken by birds. Sometimes, though, they seem to be ignored and will then persist until spring.

## INTERESTING FACTS

- Holly is one of our few native evergreen trees.
- Propagation is easily achieved by seeds or cuttings.
- Flowers normally open in May, but occasionally also in the autumn.
- It has been much used for hedging. As well as being stockproof it is very tolerant of regular cutting and of grazing. New shoots will appear from cut stems both above and at ground level.
- Fire will often kill the tree above ground but they will usually regenerate from the base. Holly will grow in a polluted atmosphere but may lose all or some of its leaves in winter.
- Severe frost will kill branches especially where open to the sky. In woodland, such damage is rare.
- Holly withstands drought, young plants sometimes responding by shedding leaves. These will be replaced the following spring.
- In the wild, holly is occasionally found in areas where water stands in winter, but when planting, such water-logged sites are best avoided.
- Hard frosts in May, when fruits are forming, can reduce the berry crop.
- The wood of holly has a fine grain, and is often used as a substitute for boxwood and, when dyed black, in lieu of ebony.
- Its thick waxy leaves enable holly to resist water loss during periods of drought.
- The same fact explains why holly does not wither when it is hung on walls at Christmas.
- The leaves last for up to four years on the tree. Although an evergreen, holly loses leaves throughout the year, rather than all at once like our deciduous trees
- Birds (especially thrushes, wood pigeons and starlings) strip the berries in harsh winters.
- To produce good fruit it appears to need a July minimum of 12°C or above.



Holly berries in November.



The glossy, leathery and spiny nature of a holly leaf.