

What's in a name?

Holly is believed to be a corruption of 'holy', indicating the tree's association with the Christ child. There have been a number of derivatives in the spelling over the ages. Hollin was a popular example where it was grown in groups or groves by farmers who used the leaves to feed livestock. The leaves are high in nutrients and calories. This spelling also occurs in a number of farm names especially in the north. This includes Hollingrave and Hollinroyd.

Botany & Ecology

This evergreen shrub is native to the UK and although it grows slowly, it can reach heights of 15m. The leaves are tough and are very prickly below 12ft.

There are male and female Holly trees and they bloom between April and May. The female flowers change into berries if pollen from the male tree is transferred. The flowers are fragrant, tiny, pale pink or white and look like stars. The female Holly Blue (*Celastrina argiolus*), butterflies lay their eggs at the base of the flower buds in the Spring and once developed into larvae, they will bore into it and empty it. The larvae also feed on the terminal leaves. The Spring generation can complete larval development entirely on leaves of male Holly bushes, although female bushes are preferred.

The berries are ripe by September and include four stones containing seed. They are dispersed by birds such as larks, finches, nightingales and fieldfares who eat them. However, they are poisonous to all other animals. If the tree fruits well one year it will often rest the next.

Folklore

Holly used to be planted near a house to protect it from lightening. In East Anglia, hollies were often planted as boundary markers much as Oaks (*Quercus* sp), were used across much of England and Wales between the 11th and 17th century. Cutting a boundary holly down was also believed to bring bad luck.

Bringing holly into the house has many superstitions. In Somerset, it was believed that only a man could bring a berried sprig or wreath into the home. After Christmas, a holly wreath had to be treated with respect as it was considered bad luck to burn it. Subsequently, it had to be discarded outside the house.

Folk Medicine

Thrashing chilblains with holy was one of the earliest 'medicinal practises' and common throughout England. This method was also used to alleviate arthritis or a stiff neck. However, the discomfort created by the holly might be seen as a greater distraction than the pain being experienced from the ailment. This was similar to the idea of beating oneself with nettles as a cure for arthritis.

Kinder treatments for chilblains included applying an ointment prepared from holly berries and, for rheumatism, an infusion of the leaves. In Hampshire, the wood from a variegated holly tree was used to make a mug and filled with milk. This was then given to children as a cure for whooping cough. The berries are poisonous to humans and were not used in any medication for internal complaints. The bark of the tree was used as a warm moist medicinal compress or poultice when dealing with broken bones.

*Please note, readers should take advice from a qualified doctor or herbalist before using plants as a cure for ailments.