



Trowel Talk!

December, 2013

'Tis the season for jolly holly

When we envision "Christmas holly", we think of bright red berries in clusters held close to the stem, and shiny green leaves with scalloped edges and prickly points. There are many species of holly, but the one that best fits this description is *Ilex aquifolium*, commonly called English holly. It is evergreen and the berries appear late in the fall and persist well into winter, so it is a very showy red and green in December. That has made it, like the poinsettia, a favourite holiday decoration.



Photo by Monique Paré

Ilex meservae 'Blue Princess'

English holly thrives in its native Mediterranean climate where it is a very large tree, but it will not survive the winter anywhere in Canada except the mildest Pacific

Trowel Talk!

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- Editor: Mary Ann Van Berlo
- trowel_talk_editor@rogers.com

regions. There are other hollies of varying hardiness, but not all of them have the characteristic spiny leaves and their berries may be blue or black or even white. Hollies also come in a great range of sizes – from large trees to shrubs and prostrate ground covers. Most are evergreen, but a few are deciduous.



Photo by Mary Ann Van Berlo

The evergreen holly leaves are a great contrast to snow

All hollies are dioecious - a word which comes from the Greek for "two houses". It means that female and male flowers are on separate plants. Only the female plants will bear fruit and there must be a male somewhere in the vicinity in bloom at the same time so pollination is possible. There are a few types that can produce some berries without pollination but even in those cultivars, the berry crop is better if a male is present.

Hybridizers have crossed English holly with *I. rugosa* and *I. cornuta*, two smaller and hardier, but less attractive, shrubs. The goal was to develop an evergreen holly with the preferred spiny leaves and red berries, but small enough to be used in the home landscape and hardy enough to survive colder winters.

The "blue" hollies (*Ilex X meservae*) belong to this group of hybrids. They are compact shrubs with a bluish cast to their foliage and hardy to zone 5, possibly

zone 4. Most local nurseries sell both male and female cultivars, and occasionally, both sexes are grouped into one container, looking like one plant. The surest way to know that you have a female is to buy one bearing berries.



Photo by Mary Ann Van Berlo

The red berries of *Ilex verticillata* (or winterberry) make a bold statement

In most Ottawa locations, these blue hollies will do best if given some protection from the winter sun and wind, which seems unfortunate given that winter is the season of highest interest for these plants. A native alternative is winterberry, *I. verticillata*. It is a small shrub, hardy to zone 3 so does not need winter protection. Its leaves do not have spiny margins and it is deciduous, but it does have bright red berries which persist on the bare branches through the winter.

Whether you purchase cut branches of English holly or gather some winterberry branches, the red berries provide a punch of colour to winter arrangements. But do make sure that your children do not feed these poisonous berries to themselves or your pets!

Kelly Noel
Master Gardener

Seasons Greetings



Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton

Where to find us this month for free gardening advice!

ONGOING:

Telephone Help Line: 613-236-0034

- Wednesday and Thursday 1-3 pm (all year)

E-mail Help Line: mgoc_helpline@yahoo.ca

- monitored daily
- send photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for ID

CLINICS:

No advice clinics until spring.

SPEAKING EVENTS & WORKSHOPS:

Lessons from My Big Fat Garden Reno – January 9 – 7:00 pm

Rebecca Last, Master Gardener

Greely Community Centre, 1448 Meadow Drive, Greely

Hosted by Greely Gardeners Group (Guests welcome – \$2)

Gardens of Cuba – January 14 – 7:30 pm

Mary Ann Van Berlo, Master Gardener

Carp Memorial Hall, 3739 Carp Road, Carp

Hosted by the West Carleton Horticultural Society (Guests welcome)

Starting Plants from Seed – January 14 – 6:30 pm

Fran Dennett, Master Gardener

Blackburn Hamlet Branch, Ottawa Public Library, 199 Glen Park, Ottawa

Hosted by the Ottawa Public Library (Click here to [register](#))

Garden Pests & Diseases – January 16 – 7:30 pm

Diane McClymont Peace, Master Gardener

City View United Church, 6 Epworth Ave., Nepean

Hosted by Nepean Horticultural Society (Guests welcome)

Introduction to Organic Vegetable Gardening – February 4 – 7:30 pm

David Hinks, Master Gardener

Old Town Hall, 821 March Road, Kanata

Hosted by Kanata-March Horticultural Society (Guests welcome)

Gardening with Children – February 6 – 7:00 pm

Judith Cox, Master Gardener

Greely Community Centre, 1448 Meadow Drive, Greely

Hosted by Greely Gardeners Group (Guests welcome – \$2)

Making Scents of your Garden – February 12 – 7:30 pm

Judith Cox, Master Gardener

Larkin House, 76 Larkin Drive, Barrhaven

Hosted by Barrhaven Garden Club (Guests welcome – \$3)

10 Must Grow Culinary Herbs – February 18 – 6:30 pm

Fran Dennett, Master Gardener

Orleans Branch, Ottawa Public Library, 1705 Orleans Blvd, Ottawa

Hosted by the Ottawa Public Library (Registration required – link not active yet)



For information on arranging a lecture for your group: speakers@mgottawa.mgoi.ca

For more information on Master Gardeners, visit us at: <http://mgottawa.mgoi.ca>

December TO DO List

- Check bulbs & tubers that are in cold storage for signs of rot OR if you've used peat moss to store them, check the moisture level of the peat moss and if it is too dry, add a bit of water to moisten it slightly.
- Start planning next year's garden by reviewing photos and notes taken during the summer.
- Keep an eye on houseplants for signs of pests. Reduce watering as the plants go dormant under the reduced light conditions.
- If you have a gardening or plant identification question, ask a Master Gardener (contact information to the right).

Tip of the Month

Winter is an excellent time to observe your garden with a critical eye. Take a look at your yard from different angles, including from inside the house. Are there areas that look bare or leave you looking directly at an eyesore? Perhaps that spot would benefit from the addition of some winter interest.



Sedums and grasses are two more perennials that add interest. The bark of the birch (can you see the face?) becomes a prominent feature in the winter.

Plants, such as the holly in our feature article, are a great way to add winter interest. The shape, structure, bark, berries and/or evergreen leaves/needles of trees and shrubs can be quite attractive. Some plants to consider are:

- Yellow or paperbark birch (bark)
- Contorted pine (needles)
- Weeping trees (structure)
- Corkscrew hazel (branches)

- High-bush cranberry (berries)
- Crab apples (fruits)

Even the seed-heads of spent perennials can be a pleasing break from the solid blanket of white in our yards. Coneflower, globe thistle and

astilbe are just a few of the perennials that have interesting forms and stand up well to snow and ice.

Statuary or garden structures are another great way to add year-round interest.