

Kentucky Champion Tree Program

AMERICAN HOLLY: NOT JUST FOR CHRISTMAS ANYMORE



Kentucky's State Champion American holly.

Photo courtesy: Tad Norris

by Diana Olszowy

Although not a particularly common tree in Kentucky's woodlands, the American holly is indeed a welcome sight during the doldrums of winter. Its bright red berries and distinct glossy green leaves make it a popular favorite not only in the woods but also in the landscape.

American holly is native along the East Coast from Massachusetts to northern Florida, and since 1620 it has been synonymous with Christmas. Legend has it that when the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock, the native holly reminded them of their own European holly which had for centuries been a symbol of Christmas. Because of its popularity as a decoration, American holly started to become scarce, causing two states (Delaware and Maryland) to pass a law banning the sale of fresh American holly.

American holly is a slow-growing tree, eventually reaching heights of 35 to 50 feet and trunks averaging 30 to 50 inches in circumference. Kentucky's state champion American holly measures 54 feet in height and over a whopping 91 inches in circumference—that's over 7.5 feet around! The champ resides in Bath County and has its own urban legend. In the early 1900s, this champ was a mere seedling growing along the roadway when it was spotted and removed by two young men on a bootlegging whiskey run from Owingsville to Peasticks for their employer. The seedling made the horse-and-buggy ride with the boys and was stored with the hidden whiskey. Later, it was planted in their employer's yard and nicknamed the "whiskey tree," due to its felonious connection to the trip.

American holly prefers moist, slightly acidic soils and grows well in full sun to partial shade. It is not a major commercial species, but its wood is some-

times used as inlay for fine furniture and veneer; it is most commonly used for piano and organ keys.

Both male and female trees must be present for berry production. The berries appear on female trees in mid-autumn and serve as a major food source for winter-migrating flocks of small birds such as cedar waxwings and American goldfinches as well as local residents such as quail, deer, squirrels, and turkeys.

By far, the biggest market for holly lies in the urban realm. Hundreds of cultivars of American holly have been developed and hybridized over the years, providing a variety of tree forms, leaf characteristics, and fruit colors. It has become one of the most preferred species to include in the landscape as a hedge, screen, or as a specimen tree. Apparently, American holly is not just for Christmas anymore!



American holly berries.

Photo courtesy: Kerry Johnson, Mississippi State University Extension Service, msucares.com

About the Author:

Diana Olszowy is Stewardship and Education Branch Manager with the Kentucky Division of Forestry. She is also an editor of the Kentucky Woodlands Magazine.

Kentucky Division of Forestry, 627 Comanche Trail, Frankfort, KY 40601; E-mail: diana.olszowy@ky.gov; Phone: 502.564.4496; Fax: 502.564.6553.