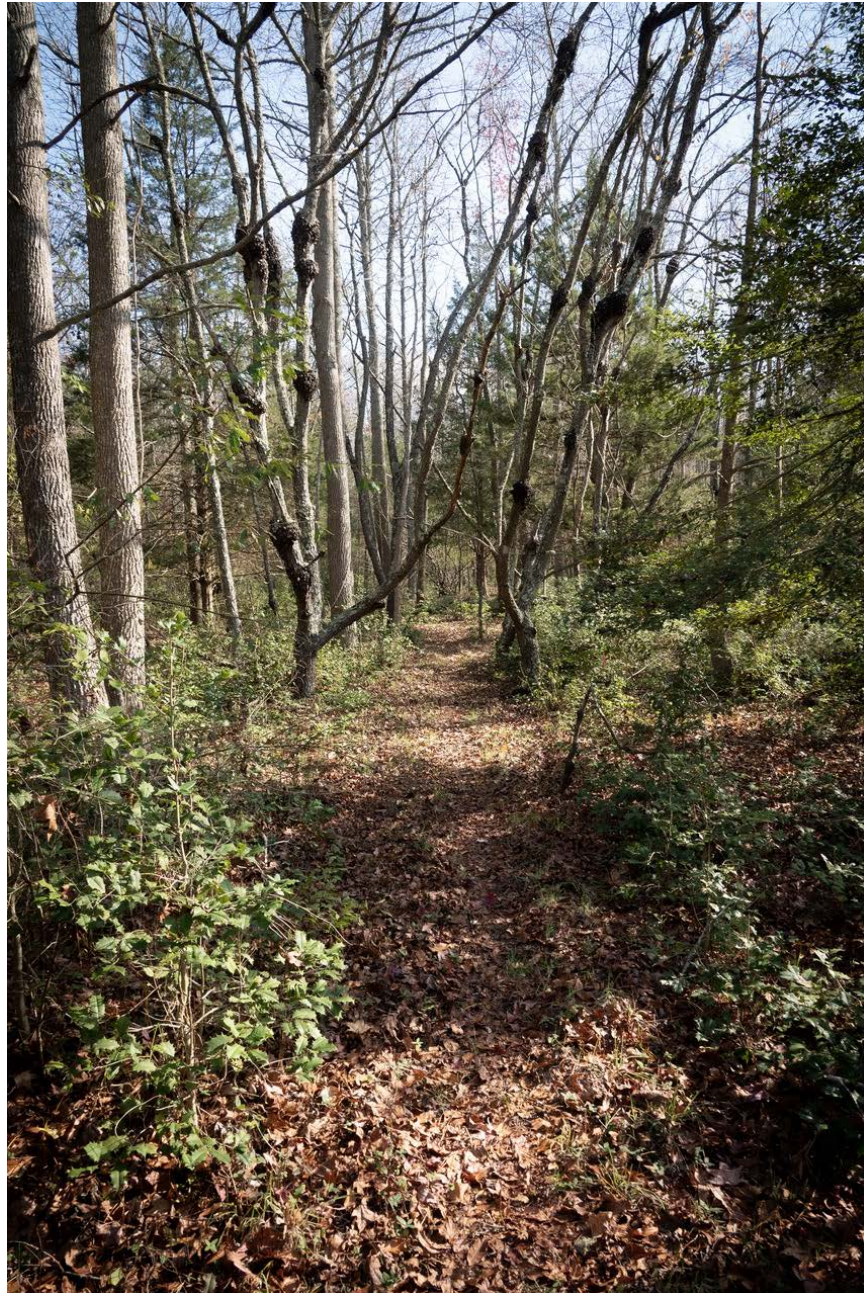




Holly Jolly

By J. Morton Galetto CU Maurice River

Southern New Jersey residents get to enjoy holly year-round in our wooded areas, but at Christmastime I'm especially appreciative of it as it adds color to what otherwise would be a more barren landscape. For centuries holly has been synonymous with the Christmas holiday, if for no better reason than its deep green leaves and red berries. But the Christmas ties actually come from cultures that pre-date Christ.



Holly and pine keep local trails accented in green throughout the winter, Mauricetown Preserve owned Natural Lands. Author.

Romans celebrated Saturn with the Saturnalia festival, linked to the god of harvest and agriculture. The Saturnalia festivities are thought to be the beginning of Druids in France and Britain using holly in their solstice celebrations by hanging it on doorways. Celtic Druid priests believed holly

warded off evil spirits. Conversely Germanic custom held that it would act as a refuge for woodland sprites. And as any good Gryffindor knows, Harry Potter's wand was made of holly wood.

In a previous article we discussed the winter solstice and its occurrence on December 21st, and how many pagan practices surrounded this yearly event. When people adopted Christianity they incorporated old pagan traditions, such as the hanging of holly in doorways. Decorating with holly was therefore carried over, with the Christian Yuletide celebrations beginning each year on December 17.

Over the centuries different traditions have converged in December, informing shifts in cultural celebrations. If this is confusing, just think of the American melting pot and how our varied backgrounds result in our families celebrating a mixture of traditions. And then throw in Santa for good measure!

Holly's popularity to this day remains associated with Christmas, dating back to these pagan roots. When the English and Europeans came to eastern North America the holly they found here reminded them of English holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), and the decorating continued. The English began using

Christmas trees c. 1840, adding to or replacing holly decorations.

Folklore suggested that the prickly leaves on holly were the crown of thorns worn by Christ, and the red berries were his blood. This is fancy, not fact. Historians believe that the likely crown worn by Jesus was in fact *ziziphus spina-christ*, an evergreen tree or plant native to Africa and to Southern and Western Asia.

There are 450 species in the *Aquifoliaceae* or holly family; all are *ilex*. There are records of *Aquifoliaceae* having existed worldwide for 90 million years, and these species are found on all the continents with the exception of Antarctica. The plant native to New Jersey is *ilex opaca* or American holly.



American holly grows from the coastal forests of Massachusetts, in the coastal plain through New York, New Jersey, and Delaware (Delaware's State Tree), and to scattered areas of southeast Pennsylvania. Then its range continues in the Piedmont and Appalachian mountain systems to central Florida. Holly is also present in Gulf states to east Texas. Highly adaptable, growing in nearly sterile soils as well as rich bottom lands, it tolerates many different moisture levels. Since it is susceptible to above-ground damage from fire, larger specimens in Southern New Jersey tend to be on the edges of pine forests in swampier areas.

Ilex opaca can grow as a shrub or a tree, primarily depending on conditions. An evergreen, it flowers from May to June. Holly are polygamo-dioecious, meaning there are both male and female trees. Only the females bear fruit, which is called a drupe because it has a central stone or seed, like a cherry or olive.

Over 13 species of birds eat holly berries. Once a person asked me whether birds can get drunk on holly berries, suggesting that she had inebriated robins in her back yard. The answer to the question is, apparently, yes. Dan Fenton, Jr., whose father was the world-famous propagator of holly

varieties, said that when he worked at Millville's famous Holly Orchard robins would sometimes get loopy from eating the fruit. But don't get any clever ideas; holly berries are mildly toxic to humans, causing vomiting and or diarrhea.



American Robins are especially fond of eating holly drupes/berries. Often flights of robins will descend on holly laden woods and strip the trees of berries. Photo credit: Andy Reago Chrissy McClarren, Flickr.

Birds that especially enjoy hollies are robins, cedar waxwings, and mockingbirds. The United States Department of Agriculture cites ecologists Miller, J.H. and K.V. Miller 1999 as a source for rating species use of various plants. Holly was rated *low* for large and small mammals and terrestrial birds, making up only 5-10% of these creatures' diet. However I would argue that in winter, when food sources are less abundant, it could be

an important component of their daily fare.

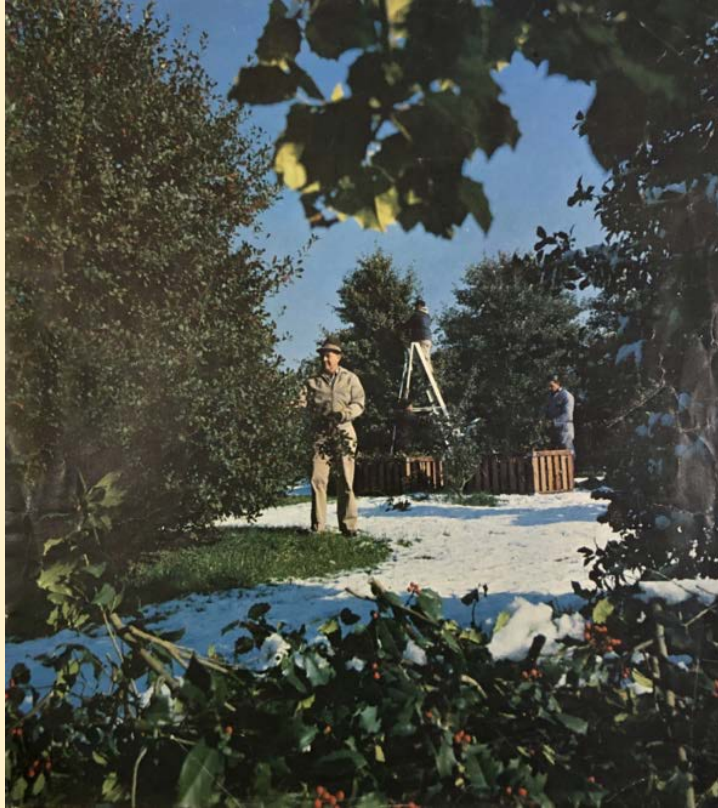
Holly wood is one of the whitest of known woods, used for chess pieces, piano keys (dyed black and used in place of ebony), broom handles, household furniture, turned objects, and inlays; carvers like the wood. A woodworker's network describes it as weighing "thirty-eight pounds per cubic foot, typical for many hardwood species."

In the past, herbalists and physicians made use of this plant. English holly was brewed in teas to promote sweating and prescribed for fever-inducing illnesses like malaria – I suppose to lower the fever. Berry juice, though very toxic, was used as a treatment for jaundice. Native Americans used native holly in a tea known as "black drink," as a cleanse in ritual purifications. Cherokee used it as a gastrointestinal aid, where berries were chewed for colics and dyspepsia. Leaves were used to scratch cramped muscles. Choctaw and Alabama tribes made bark washes for sore eyes. The Koasati employed bark rubs for itchy skin. But let me be clear: the tree has toxins just as do many of today's powerful modern medicines, and in unskilled hands such "remedies" can be lethal.

In New Jersey American holly generally reaches 40 to 50 feet, but in the best of conditions it can grow up to 80-100 feet. Holly shows up in later successional stage in our forests, coastal dunes, and barrier islands, meaning that if you have a field and it is left to grow, hollies are not generally the earliest of plants that appear. It is abundant in our coastal plain and also in the hardwood swamps of the Pine Barrens.

For me holly is one of the loveliest of trees in the winter. At this season it is loaded with drupes/berries, just waiting along the trails of New Jersey's wild areas for you to enjoy its beauty. I suppose it's in your neighborhood yards as well. Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays!

(Please scroll down for a holiday recollection by the Author and sources)



Dan Fenton, Sr. manager of Millville's Holly Orchard c. 1960s collecting holly boughs for Christmas decorations. Photo: Unidentified periodical, courtesy of Millville Historical Society.

The Holly City

A recollection by J. Morton Galetto

Millville, New Jersey got its moniker from woodlands of holly and the Holly Orchard, which operated from the 1940s until the late '80s. Formerly there was a monument on the triangle of Sharp and High Streets announcing your arrival to *Millville the Holly City*.

The monument was a gray stone wall with raised stainless steel letters affixed by rods. One year before Christmas some imaginative rascal(s) swiped one "L" from "holly," making the announcement holiday ready. I'm not naming names because I don't know the statute of limitations on that type of thing, but I suspect the creator of the sign was mad as a hornet. I'm sure it caused many motorists to smile as they entered the City over the ensuing years until the sign was changed out!

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December 1950 harvest; each of the large crates held 15 gift boxes of holly cuttings. Orchard owner Clarence Wolf sent nearly 1,500 boxes to friends and customers for Christmas that year. Photo courtesy of Millville Historical Society.



In 1952 Dan Fenton, Sr. built his home in Millville. Today (2022) the native hollies he planted are about 81 years ago dwarf the home. Dan Fenton, Jr. the current resident relays his father planted many species of holly on the property. Photo: JMG.

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