Hollies for the holidays

Hollies are bright and festive plants that meet many landscaping needs. They are among the most common landscape plants used in the United States.

Hollies range from large upright trees to dwarf spreading shrubs. This diversity in size and form within the genus *Ilex* offers great variety for planting in Northwest Florida. Certain species do well as hedges, while others are best used as accent plants. Dwarf species are ideal for foundation plantings.

Leaves are either evergreen or deciduous—meaning the leaves fall off annually. Although usually depicted with spiny margins, hollies can be lightly serrated or not at all.

Hollies are dioecious plants meaning that there are separate male and female plants. It’s only the female plants that produce the beautiful berries. Male plants will produce white flowers but not fruit. The berries are an attractive feature of many hollies and colors range from white, yellow, purple, black and red.

Hollies will tolerate a wide range of light and soil conditions. They require minimal pruning, except to train the plants for special purposes or to remove diseased or dead branches.

Hollies do best if planted between November and March. Well-drained soils are essential and slightly acidic soils with high fertility are desirable. Care should be taken not to waterlog the soil.

Diseases and insects are not a major problem on hollies. The most common insect pests include scale, mites and spittlebugs. Diseases known to attack hollies include twig dieback, stem gall and root rot. Root rots are usually associated with hollies planted in poorly drained wet soils.

Among the hollies that do well are many native species. Using local choices will insure that the plant is adapted to your landscape. Some recommended hollies for Northwest Florida include:

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- American holly (*Ilex opaca*) grows throughout the eastern United States, and is the common holly associated with Christmas. With its spiny leaves and red or yellow fruit, it can be a premier accent tree in the landscape. It does not do as well in alkaline soils but takes well to variety of light conditions. Over a thousand cultivars of this species have been developed.

- Dahoon holly (*Ilex cassine*) grows throughout Florida and is an ideal choice for a specimen or street tree. The light green leaves have a hint of stickers on their edges.

- Yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*) is a native holly that can be a small shrub or a small tree, depending on the variety. The small gray-green leaves lack thorns and produce red berries enjoyed by wildlife. Many cultivars and varieties exist. ‘Pendula’ is a large weeping form with red fruit. ‘Schillings’ is one of the best compact forms, reaching only 3 to 4 foot high and wide.

- ‘Nellie R. Stevens’ is the grand dame of landscape hollies. It is actually a hybrid. It is upright and pyramidal with dark green leaves and is an excellent red fruiting cultivar.

Once your holly is happily established in your yard, use the attractive foliage in indoor arrangements or enjoy watching birds feed on the berries outside.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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