

Home/Garden

Holly right at home during holiday season

*Oh the holly and the ivy
When they are both full grown
Of all the trees that are in the wood
The holly wears the crown.*

Holly is one of the most ancient and still one of the most important plants we use for holiday decorations. Originally, the holly, along with many other evergreen plants like the fir and laurel, was a fertility symbol because of its ability to retain its foliage in winter. There are many stories about holly and many powers are attributed to the plant, but these superstitions are not always consistent.

For example, a piece of holly taken from the church decorations and kept all year would bring good luck, but holly brought into the house before Christmas Eve or left there after Twelfth Night (Jan. 6) would bring bad luck.

Our Christmas is celebrated at approximately the same time as the Saturnalia, the Roman festival in honor of Saturn, a god of agriculture, which occurred between Dec. 17 and 23. Gifts were exchanged and there was feasting, while servants were waited on by their masters. Holly was used as a decoration and when the Church made use of the date it also appropriated the holly with some changes. One Christian legend says that the Cross was made of hollywood and the crown of thorns made of prickly holly leaves. It is because the berries were stained by Christ's blood that they are red. As a

Pat
Leuchtman



Between
The Rows

penance the once fine tree is now slight and twisted for its part in the Crucifixion.

Ivy also had a long history before it appeared in the Christmas carol. It also is evergreen, but it is the female force to the holly's male force. In Greek mythology, Ivy was the maiden who danced with such love and joy before Dionysius that she fell dead at his feet. In honor of her love he turned her into a plant that would embrace whatever was near. When ivy twines around the holly it becomes a symbol of the human soul submitting to Christ.

Another plant that we usually think of only at Christmas is the mistletoe which has an ancient and pagan history, in many cultures. The waxy mistletoe berries turn gold as they age and, according to the Romans, mistletoe was the famous Golden Bough, which unlocked the gates of the Underworld for Aeneas. Indeed, it is said that mistletoe will open any lock.

In Scandinavia the mistletoe was responsible for the death of Balder, son of Odin, the god of creation. At



Recorder/Lucia Russon

one time Balder was troubled by bad dreams that foretold his death. Frigga, his mother and the goddess of love, hoping to secure his safety,

bade all things growing on or under the earth, fire and water, iron and all metals, stones, earth, trees, illness and poison, all four-footed ani-

mals and all creeping things to swear they would never harm her beloved son.

However, Loki, the god of mischief, found that Frigga had forgotten the mistletoe. It was a plant that grew parasitically on the oak and thus did not grow on or under the ground. The wicked Loki tricked Hother who was blind into hitting Balder with the mistletoe, and he was instantly killed. In one version of the story Frigga wept over Balder's body and brought him back to life, her tears turning into the white berries of the mistletoe. In her joy it is said she bestows a kiss on whom-ever passes beneath the mistletoe; hence our own custom.

The mistletoe became sacred to the Scandinavians; if enemies met in the forest and mistletoe was there they put their weapons aside and declared truce.

Somewhat less ancient as a Christmas decoration is the Mexican poinsetta. According to Mexican legend a poor boy wept and prayed at Christmas because he had no gift to offer the Christ Child. When he rose from his knees, the poinsetta, the "flower of the Holy Night" sprang from the ground in full bloom and the boy was able to lay the brilliant flowers on the altar.

Actually, the red or white "flowers" are bracts, modified leaves that surround the inconspicuous flowers in the center.

In Greek mythology, Ivy was the maiden who danced with such love and joy before Dionysius that she fell dead at his feet. In honor of her love he turned her into a plant that would embrace whatever was near. When ivy twines around the holly it becomes a symbol of the human soul submitting to Christ.

In 1829 the United States ambassador to Mexico, Joel Poinsett, brought the plant to his home in South Carolina where it became a popular Christmas decoration and continues so to this day, carrying his name.

So as we all deck our halls with holly and mistletoe and poinsettas, I wish you a happy holiday and a year of love and peace.