When Linnaeus was working on his classification of plants, he realized that the evergreen holly oak or holm-oak was an oak and not a holly, and so it would have to go into the genus Quercus. However, he retained the holly name in the specific nomenclature, and called it Quercus ilex. To the true holly, he gave the generic name Ilex, but because it had always been known as Aquifolium, meaning ‘sharp-leaved’, he called it Ilex aquifolium, which remains the scientific label of the European holly today.

The European holly does not grow well in the American climate, but we have in its place the quite similar and closely related American holly, Ilex opaca. It is just as good for Christmas decorations since the female trees (the sexes are separate) have lots of brilliant red berries. The berries usually stay on the trees until after December, although they may be eaten by birds during the dour winter months of January and February.

The American holly is a medium-sized usually 30 to 50 feet high, although it can be as much as 100 feet, and the state record is held by a tree in Cumberland State Forest which is 68 feet. There is a tree that obviously used to be a record-making one on Hog Island in Surry County. A few years ago a storm took its toll of all but the first fifteen feet, but the venerable remaining stump (of enormous girth) is still somehow deserving of our admiration and respect.

Ilex opaca grows naturally from the coast of Massachusetts south to the middle of Florida and west to eastern Texas, Missouri and West Virginia. It is frequently cultivated, adapting well to many different kinds of soil. When we bought our old house in Albemarle County, we were pleased with the huge old holly on the west side of the house, but sad to find that it was a male tree and hence had no berries. We transplanted three small seedling hollies, too small to have flowers, from the woods, and were delighted to find several years later that we had gambled correctly. Our erstwhile bachelor tree now has three young brides who are just beginning to have a respectable crop of berries each year.

The association of holly with Christmas is a very old one, and the name holly may have come from its use as a decoration during Holy week. Holly wood is of some economic importance, being used for cabinet work and carving. It is very hard and close-grained and will take a high polish. The sapwood is quite pale and was used to make piano and organ keys because of its similarity to ivory.

In coastal areas of Virginia there is another evergreen holly which goes by the unattractive name Ilex vomitoria, the yaupon. Leaves of this holly were frequently used to make tea, but too much of the drink had dire emetic consequences, hence the name.

There are also several deciduous hollies native to the state. Mountain holly, Ilex montana is a frequent shrub or small tree along the Appalachianians. The possum-haw, Ilex decidua grows in low woods and bottom land. And more spectacular at the Christmas decorating season are Ilex verticillata, winterberry, and I. laevigata smooth winterberry, both of which have brilliant red berries (occasionally yellow.) The berries are often larger than those of the American holly, although of course there are no evergreen leaves to “set them off.”

How winterberry came by its red berries is told in a version of the old fire legend. The only fire in the world was on an inaccessible island, guarded by a monster, and various animals set out to try and procure it. The tortoise failed because he was too slow and the fire went out, the deer lost it in a thicket and the kingfisher dropped it into the sea during a dive. Finally the unpopular crow succeeded where the others had failed. His only mistake was to brag of his achievement as he arrived which caused all the red coals to fall. Only one was saved for fire, and the rest dropped onto bushes to make winterberries. Well, that suits me. We all need cheering up in the winter months, and the bright berries of so many members of the holly family make a big contribution towards this.