



December

Zoom in on holly and ivy



Young holly hedge. (Inset: female holly)



Background information

Holly is a native evergreen shrub. It tolerates shade and often grows in the shrub layer of an oak wood. Its leaves are leathery and shiny and often have sharp spines on the margins. Their waxy surfaces prevent water loss. The flowers of both male and female hollies are white and emerge in May/June. Pollen from the male flowers is transferred to the female flowers by insects; the red berries which develop from the female flowers each contain four seeds.

Ivy (*Hedera helix*) an evergreen, native climber uses aerial roots along its stem to adhere to a host so that it can reach light. It is not a parasite as some people believe. It has its own root system completely independent of the host plant it uses for support. Its yellow-green flowers bloom from September to December; these develop into black berries which are found in January and February.



Stratifying berries

Active learning indoors and outdoors

Indoors

Make an ivy wreath. See www.ehow.com

Outdoors

Stratify holly berries The cutting of whole trunks and boughs from trees has resulted in a scarcity of this native species. Schools can assist in its regeneration by growing *Ilex aquifolium* from seed. All that's needed are holly berries from native trees, a large flowerpot of sand and of course patience! It will take over a year for the seeds to germinate in the damp sand. See 'Paddy's School Garden' on www.blackrockec.ie

Examine ivy leaves There are two types of leaves: lobed and oval. There are three or five lobes on an ivy leaf. The non-lobed leaves produce the flowers and fruits. All leaves are leathery and glossy and coloured dark-green on the top and

pale-green underneath. The veins are light-green. There is minimum overlapping of leaves to maximise exposure to light. Some lobes are pointed; some are rounded.

Grow an ivy bush As we have seen the flowering shoots of ivy have oval-shaped leaves. If cuttings are taken from these they will grow into ivy bushes that will stand on their own. They will have no climbing roots and will be fertile.

Grow a holly hedge A holly hedge on its own is very attractive. It acts as a barrier against wind because it filters it between its leaves and stems. It prevents intruders from entering the grounds and of course it's also very useful for wildlife. It can also be planted in a mixed native hedge. Plant bare-rooted hollies in any month with an 'r' except April and September. Use the guidelines on Chapter 9 of 'Go Wild at School' for planting same or watch an instructional video on www.blackrockec.ie Click on 'Paddy's School Garden'.

The Ivy debate: friend or foe?

PROS

- ✦ Flowers full of nectar in autumn when it's scarce elsewhere.
- ✦ Food for late-flying insects such as honey bees and wasps.
- ✦ Fruits in winter.
- ✦ Food for hungry birds such as blackbirds, mistle thrushes, robins and pigeons.
- ✦ Roost for birds.
- ✦ Haven for hibernating insects and butterfly larvae.
- ✦ Prevents erosion of soil.
- ✦ Attractive plant in winter landscape.

CONS

- ✦ Can hinder growth by smothering leaves and preventing tree from breathing through its bark.
- ✦ Can weigh down branches until they break.
- ✦ By acting as a sail can increase risk of storm damage.
- ✦ Destroys old walls and buildings of historical interest. Increases dampness in walls.



Holly in snow

Useful websites

www.logainm.ie

www.rte.ie/radio/mooneygoeswild Factsheet on holly

Useful books

📖 *Irish Trees Myths, Legends & Folklore* (2003) by Niall Mac Coitir

📖 *Irish Wild Plants Myths, Legends & Folklore* (2006) by Niall Mac Coitir

📖 *Wild Things at School* (2009) by Eanna Ní Lamhna

Placenames associated with holly and ivy

- ✂ Killaney – *Ivy church*
- ✂ Inagh – *Place abounding in ivy*
- ✂ Gleninagh – *Glen of the ivy*
- ✂ Clonenagh – *Meadow of the ivy*
- ✂ Cullen – *Place abounding in holly*
- ✂ Kilcullen – *Church of the holly*
- ✂ Glencullen – *Glen of the holly*
- ✂ Moycullen – *Plain of holly*
- ✂ Cloncullen – *Meadow of holly*

The holly blue butterfly

This butterfly is unique because its caterpillars eat the flower buds of different food plants. In spring the females lay their eggs on the buds of holly flowers; the adults which emerge from this brood lay their eggs on ivy flowers. These spend the winter as pupae often well-hidden in the ivy.

**Folklore of holly and ivy**

Holly was classified by the 8th century Laws of Neighbourhood as one of the seven 'nobles of the wood'. These included as well oak, ash, yew, Scots pine, crab apple, hazel.

It had a high ranking because it was a most useful tree for war (making chariot shafts and spears) and for feeding livestock. The fine for cutting down one of these trees was two and a half milch cows; for cutting a branch a one year old heifer; for cutting a fork a two year old heifer. Holly and ivy were used for protection against evil spirits. In winter holly was brought indoors so that the "good people" could find shelter in it from the cold. Like ivy it was a symbol of green life which would come in spring.

The word 'holly' comes from the word 'holy' and was associated with Christ's suffering: the thorns represented his crown and the berries his dripping blood.

Both holly and ivy leaves were put under the pillow to foretell marriage. This rhyme was recited:

*"Oh ivy green and holly red,
Tell me, tell me when I shall wed".*

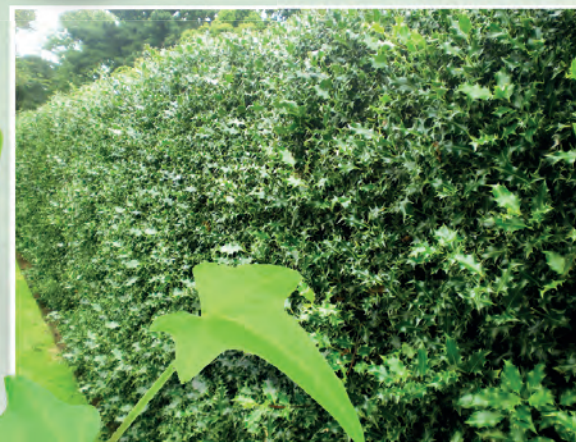
Strand Units covered this month

Environmental awareness, Caring for the environment, Plant and animal life, The local natural environment.

Ivy flower



Mature holly hedge in the National Botanic Gardens



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