

# Holly, mistletoe and knee holly



This year appears to be a good year for holly berries, which will please those who decorate their homes at Christmas. It is perhaps the only traditional use of holly that survives.

From prehistoric times until the 18th century, holly was cut to provide winter browse for sheep and cattle. Small holly trees were used to clean chimneys, by hauling them through on ropes, and the white, pliable wood was prized for making horse whips. The most widespread use of holly in the past was as a boundary tree. It may have been to do with its visibility or with the belief that cutting down holly trees brings bad luck. In East Sussex holly was left to grow as a tree in hedges to prevent the passage of witches, which were said to run along hedge tops.

The custom of decorating homes with evergreens in midwinter goes back to pre-Christian times. Regarded as a symbol of the continuity of life throughout the dark days of winter, the holly tradition was adopted easily by Christianity – the spiny leaves representing the crown of thorns and the berries the blood of Christ.

The good holly crop will be useful for birds this year, especially given the poor fruiting of many hedgerow shrubs. The tree is a magnet for members of the thrush family – most of them feed on the berries when other more palatable berries have disappeared, particularly the blackbird and mistle thrush. Mistle thrushes, either singly or in pairs, defend holly trees vigorously as a food source in winter, keeping rivals away unless overwhelmed by flocks of winter-visiting redwings and fieldfares. Another bird that finds holly useful is the blue tit, whose agility enables it to peck holes in the blister galls on holly leaves to get at the larvae and pupae of the tiny flies that cause these galls.

Mistle thrushes, whose name is derived from mistletoe, have also been seen to defend mistletoe clumps. Apart from providing thrushes with food, holly and mistletoe have several other things in common. Both are the only representatives of their family in Britain, both bear male and female flowers on separate plants, both have magical associations and both are used in Christmas celebrations. The magic of mistletoe extends further than gaining

a kiss. Its winter-green leaves among the bare boughs of its host tree made it a symbol of the continuity of life; it was believed capable of curing epilepsy, dispelling tumours, keeping witches at bay and promoting human fertility.

The knee holly is an old name for butcher's broom, a shrub with only a slight Christmas connection. Victorian butchers on the Isle of Wight used to deck their Christmas sirloins with the berry-bearing twigs. More widespread was the use of bundles of the spiny branches to scour butchers' blocks and to make miniature indoor hedges to keep mice away from the meat. It is confined to old woods and hedges and produces its tiny greenish- white flowers on the underside of the spiny stems (which look like leaves) between January and April. The woods in the parish have some good example of this shrubby member of the lily family and it even appears in quantity in some old hedgerows.

### **Ash dieback**

Most people would have heard of the fungal pathogen *Chalara fraxinea* that threatens our country's ash trees. Initially small necrotic spots appear on stems and branches. These enlarge, resulting in wilting, dieback of branches and death in the top of the crown. It is particularly destructive of young ash plants, killing them within one growing season of symptoms becoming visible. The signs to look for this autumn are fallen ash leaves whose stalks have turned black and bear the tiny fruiting bodies. The Forestry Commission website has some useful information on spotting the disease at <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/chalara>.

If you see any trees that appear to be infected, please let me know. jacqueline.hutson@btinternet.com or 01273 890341.

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