



ALMANAC

Thursday, May 1, 2025



ORDER YOUR ALMANAC TODAY!

HOME > GARDENING > GROWING GUIDES

How to Grow Holly Bushes



Photo Credit: Stella Oriente

Botanical Name:
Ilex spp.

Plant Type:
Shrubs and Bushes

Sun Exposure:
Full Sun, Part Sun

FREE GUIDE!

Soi [Slightly](#)
l [Acidic](#)
pH [to](#)
: [Neutral](#)

Ha [4](#), [5](#), [6](#),
rdi- [7](#), [8](#), [9](#)
ne
ss
Zo
ne:

Sp [Attracts](#)
eci [Songbir](#)
al [ds](#),
Fe [Deer-](#)
atu [resistan](#)
res [t](#)
:

Planting, Growing, and Pruning Holly Bushes

By [Andy Wilcox](#)

Last Updated: November 22, 2024



Sign up for daily gardening advice and tips

Enter your email address

SIGN UP

ADVERTISEMENT



Plan your 2025 garden with our award-winning Garden Planner.

TRY NOW

Holly bushes bear lovely evergreen leaves year-round and also bear attractive red berries. If you'd like to grow your own boughs to Deck the Halls, this is the plant. And they're easy to grow! Learn how to plant, grow, and care for hollies.

ADVERTISEMENT

About Holly

Maybe you cut holly leaves from green paper in grade school to make decorations for the holidays or drew their dark evergreen leaves and red berries with crayons to make a card. Evergreen holly trees and bushes have been tied to the winter season for centuries, but there are deciduous species, too.

The genus *Ilex* contains hundreds of hollies, and plant breeders have been busy making fantastic and easy-to-grow cultivars. There's plenty to choose from, with sizes ranging from full-size trees to

Hollies are mostly evergreen perennials, although a few are deciduous, like the winterberry (*I. verticillata*). Holly shrubs make excellent privacy or security hedges and provide a natural habitat for songbirds. Their fruits can be of many colors, including the bright red they are famous for, as well as white, orange, yellow, and black.

ADVERTISEMENT

Holly trees and shrubs are *dioecious*, meaning the plants are either male or female. You'll need at least one of each to see those brilliant red berries in the autumn. Many vendors identify the male and

‘Blue Princess’s and ‘Blue Prince’ holly are examples of male and female cultivars. If you already have a holly in your yard and aren’t sure which it is, watch for a year. If it fruits in autumn, it’s a female plant (and you have a male holly nearby). Lately, breeders have created a few self-fertile holly cultivars.



‘Blue Girl’ Holly.

Read Next

- [How to Grow a Viburnum Shrub](#)
- [How to Grow Mock Orange: The Complete Guide](#)
- [How to Grow and Care for a Smokebush: A Complete Gardener's Guide](#)

PLANTING

Holly trees and shrubs vary widely in size, so consider your plant's mature sizing when choosing a location. Plant them more closely together for a hedge effect, or spread them out for a natural look.

Hollies will grow in most soil types as long as they're adequately drained. Hollies don't mind an occasional damp period, but ponding or standing water can kill them. They prefer slightly acidic soil that is well-draining, loamy, and partial to full sun.

If you're in the southern range of the plants' viable zones, pick a spot with afternoon shade. Conversely, those at the northern edge of the range should pick spots in full sun that are sheltered from cold winter winds.

When to Plant Holly

Hollies in containers can be planted at any time, but spring or early autumn are easiest on the plants. If planting in autumn,

establish new roots before cold weather sets in.

ADVERTISEMENT

Bare-root holly plants are typically shipped in late winter or early spring. They should be planted as soon as possible after receipt. If you can't plant immediately, store them in a dark location and keep the roots moist.

How to Plant Holly

- Dig a hole 2-3 times as wide as the root ball and slightly deeper. It should resemble a saucer, not a soup can.
- Set the holly in the ground and match

the new surrounding ground level.

Toss in a bit more soil if the plant sits too deep.

- If the roots are circled or potbound, you'll want to loosen them first. Use a soil knife or garden trowel to cut any girdling roots and to loosen packed pot-bound roots.
- Set your holly in the hole and begin backfilling with the soil you removed. Be sure to firm the soil as you go to eliminate air pockets.
- Water thoroughly, ensuring water soaks in and doesn't just run off. Creating a low ridge of soil around the newly planted shrub can help water stay put long enough to infiltrate.
- Apply a mulch layer 3-4 inches deep around the base, but don't mound mulch around the stem. Mulch in contact with the trunk can cause prolonged damp conditions, leading to rot and disease.

GROWING

for shaping or removing an injured branch.

- During the first year, water regularly. Especially if establishing a hedge, follow the inch-per-week rule, either from rain or the hose.
- Avoid heavy shearing or pruning in late fall, as the coming cold weather can damage the new growth that flushes. Broken, diseased, or dead branches can be removed at any time.
- Some hollies bloom on old wood (last year's growth), and some on new wood. Check online to see which scenario you have, and you'll know how to time any aesthetic pruning.
- If desired, fertilize in spring with a slow-release, general-purpose fertilizer or one labeled for acid-loving shrubs and ornamental trees. Avoid fertilizing in the fall, as new growth won't harden off before winter.

How to Propagate Holly

Growing new hollies from seed is complex

try taking cuttings if you'd like to experiment with propagating hollies. While many species and cultivars exist, use this general recipe.

1. Take cuttings in fall or early winter, typically from September into November. Cut 4- to 6-inch terminal cuttings from branches with firm 1-year-old wood.
2. Use a 1:1 mix of coir and perlite or coir and damp sand. The mix needs to drain well.
3. Remove all but two or three leaves.
4. Wound the base of the cutting on two sides, gently scraping off a strip of bark about an inch long.
5. Dip the cuttings in the rooting hormone. Start with 1-2% IBA.
6. Stick the cuttings in the rooting mix, firming around their base.
7. Use a humidity dome to keep moisture levels high. Alternatively, a plastic bag and a rubber band can work. Don't allow the bag to touch the leaves.

Types

- ‘Jersey Princess’ (*I. opaca*) is an American holly that fits the bill of traditional, glossy leaves and bright red berries. A small tree at maturity, this cultivar will reach 20-30 feet tall.
- ‘Jersey Knight’ (*I. opaca*) is a male American holly, with all the gorgeous foliage but no fruits. Plant with ‘Jersey Princess’ as a pollinator.
- Burford holly (*I. cornuta*) is a popular Chinese holly suited for warmer climates—USDA Zones 7-9. It’s a dense evergreen shrub perfect for creating hedges and is self-fertile.
- ‘Sky Pencil’ is a Japanese holly (*I. crenata*) that grows tall and narrow. Relatively fast growing, it will reach a height of about 10 feet but only 2-3 feet wide. Perfect for small spaces or even large containers.

GARDENING PRODUCTS



PESTS/DISEASES

- [Spider mites](#)
- Ash whitefly
- [Scale insects](#)
- Holly leaf miner

WIT AND WISDOM

- Wood from holly trees is dense and hard. Woodworkers sometimes stain it black to imitate more expensive ebony wood.
- In autumn, [holly berries are hard and](#)

- Holly was a sacred plant of the Druids and was believed to provide protection from evil spirits.

SHRUBS AND TREES

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

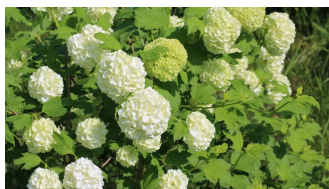
Andy Wilcox



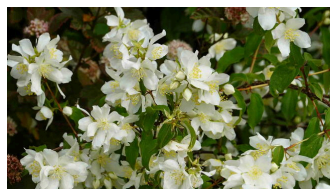
Andy Wilcox is a flower farmer and master gardener with a passion for soil health, small producers, forestry, and horticulture.

[Read More from Andy Wilcox](#)

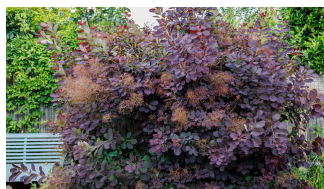
MORE LIKE THIS



**How to Grow a
Viburnum
Shrub**



**How to Grow
Mock Orange:
The Complete
Guide**



**How to Grow
and Care for a
Smokebush: A
Complete
Gardener's
Guide**



How to Grow a Magnolia Tree



The 15 Best Flowers That Bloom in Winter



How to Grow a Bay Laurel Tree (Bay Leaf)



GROW YOUR BEST GARDEN YET

Join The Old Farmer's Almanac Gardening Club Today!

[LEARN MORE](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

COMMENTS

ADD A COMMENT

Mary Colwell (not verified) 1 year ago

Hi Andy, I love winterberry Holly! It's such a lovely native, gorgeous in fall with its scarlet fruits, fragrant and stunning with its multitude of white flowers. The pollinators love it! It does like damp feet though, so I can't have it in my yard. Please keep encouraging native plants for your readers.

ADVERTISEMENT

REPLY

Jay Barnes (not verified) 1 year ago

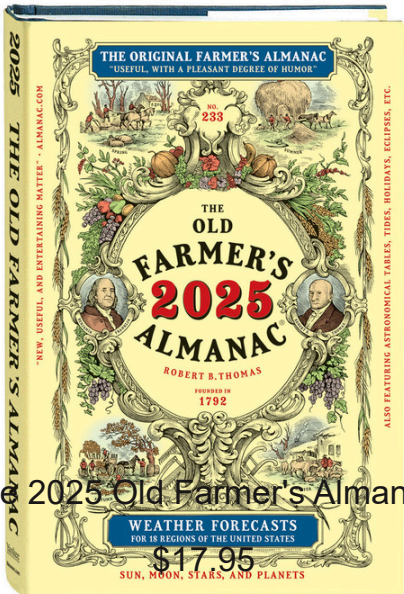
The Blue Prince and Princess we grow here in Maine is candy to our whitetail deer

REPLY

Do they eat the leaves or just the berries?

REPLY

THE OLD FARMER'S STORE



The 2025 Old Farmer's Almanac...

\$17.95

BUY NOW



The Old Farmer's Almanac Pr...

\$18.99

BUY NOW



BUY NOW

BUY NOW

ADVERTISEMENT

Our Brands

[The Old Farmer's](#)

[Almanac for Kids](#)

[Yankee Magazine](#)

[Family Tree Magazine](#)

[NH Business Review](#)

[New Hampshire](#)

[Magazine](#)

[Yankee Custom](#)

[Marketing](#)

Resources

[About Us](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Free Daily Newsletter](#)

[Webcam](#)

[Advertise with Us](#)

[Media Relations](#)

[Sell the Almanac](#)

[Where to Buy](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Cookie List](#)

[Do Not Sell or Share](#)

[My Personal](#)

[Information](#)

Connect with Us

