

fresh focus

By Bill McKinley AIFD and Bruce Wright



A Christmas classic, ilex reigns as king of berried branches.

YOU KNOW HOW siblings can be alike and yet oh so different? That's how it is with "ilex"—the name commonly given in the floral industry to *Ilex verticillata*, also called winterberry—and the evergreen Christmas foliage that we usually call just holly, though it is also a kind of ilex, *Ilex aquifolia*.

These two florist holiday staples are not just in the same botanical family, they're in the same genus (*Ilex*). Of the more than 400 species in that large and complex genus, these two are by far the best known. Holly may also be called "English holly" or "European holly," while ilex is sometimes called "American winterberry," reflecting the origins of the two species.

Both are prized for their berries, usually red. But while holly also bears glossy, evergreen leaves with a scalloped outline that has become part of Christmas iconography, ilex is deciduous: it drops its leaves in the fall, the better to display rich clusters of fruit that last well into the season (hence the

name "winterberry").

Another difference is that while holly is quite ethylene sensitive, ilex is less so. In fact, growers may actually subject ilex to small amounts of ethylene on purpose, in order to hasten leaf drop. When the leaves remain on the stems at harvest time, they must be removed by hand, a laborious process. Ilex is also an ethylene producer and should be stored separately from ethylene-sensitive flowers like carnations or alstroemeria.

Harvest season

The ilex season actually kicks off in mid October with orange and yellow ilex, popular for fall and Halloween arrangements. "By early to mid November, we swing into the red," says Ginny Wyche of Sun Valley Farms, which supplies ilex from the company's Willow Creek Division in northern California. There is some overlap with the orange and yellow, but the early market for red is pretty

strong, according to Ginny. Peak supply probably occurs around Thanksgiving. After that, it may drop off, if only because field-grown ilex is vulnerable to feasting by flocks of migrating winter birds, says Andy Siller of Oregon Roses: "If they find it, they can pick a lot of berries in a hurry." Holly berries in general offer an important food source for certain birds—even though the berries are mildly toxic to humans and pets.

The West Coast offers a very favorable environment for growing ilex, says Andy, with a long, generally mild growing season and rich soils. Although it has also been grown in the upper Midwest—sold in short stems by the pound—West Coast ilex is closer to the product available out of the Netherlands, with long stems and large berries. "We've been growing

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ilex for 30 years," Andy reports—since 1980 or so, which is when Oregon Roses began to diversify into the products that are now its mainstay: Christmas greens, ornamental branches, and specialty flowers like peonies, hydrangea, and forsythia.



Ilex comes in classic red and also in a golden yellow that is available earlier in the season, starting in mid October. By Thanksgiving, red dominates the market. Each of these photos shows premium ilex from Sun Valley Farms (www.thesunvalleygroup.com). A brilliant orange, popular for Halloween, is also available.

care tips

holly

- Holly (meaning any ornamental species in the genus *Ilex*) should be selected with plump berries that show no sign of browning or blackening. On evergreen species, the leaves should show no signs of dehydration or discolored edges.
- Always immediately open the boxes or bags that contain holly to expel any ethylene gas that may have accumulated. Holly berries, as with most fruits, can produce large quantities of dam-

aging ethylene gas, which causes the berries and leaves to fall from the stems.

- Treat with an ethylene inhibitor following manufacturer's instructions.
- Though past practices have suggested that storing holly dry (out of water in high-humidity bags or waxed boxes) does not affect vase life, experts currently recommend that for longest storage and best vase life, holly should be kept in water. Re-cut stem ends, removing at least an inch, and place in a tepid floral food solution formulated for woody stems.
- Store holly at 34 degrees F and 80% humidity.

Although ilex leaves will drop naturally in time, the timing of the leaf drop varies with the season. And in any case, growers can't always wait for the leaves to drop before harvesting the berried stems—they have customers who want their product. "When we harvest ilex, it still has the leaves on it," says Ginny, and the leaves mostly have to be removed by hand. Growers do have tricks to encourage leaf drop: covering the branches with plastic or spraying with a concentrated fertilizer mix. If ilex is delivered to your shop with leaves still on, you should remove them, since they will fade long before the berries do, and make sure that they are not accompanied by any mold.

Birds and bees

A quirk of growing ilex is that, like other hollies, it is dioecious, meaning that male and female parts are found on separate plants, so that pollinators are required for the fruit to set. "We put bees in the crop to get good pollination and good berry set, to supplement nature's bees," says Ginny. Pollination also requires a ratio of about one male to ten female plants, notes Andy.

Natural cross-pollination means natural variation in the plants, which allows an alert grower to select the best for future cultivation. "This is one of Lane's favorite crops," says Ginny, referring to Sun Valley owner Lane De-

Vries. "He'll find a plant with the characteristics we want, like good berry density, and make cuttings off of that plant. He has the rows of plants marked like in a movie theater so he can keep track. We found some great truly brilliant orange berries that way."

It takes a few years, however, before a new plant from a cutting produces berries that can be harvested. And in the mature plants, berried stems are cut only every second year. "It's not a short-term, whip 'em out crop," notes Ginny. "You have to invest in it."

What to look for

Ilex is typically graded for the market, by stem length, how many berries on a stem, and how many branches come off the main stem. But quality is just as important as quantity. "Look for firm berries, not dehydrated," says Ginny. "Think of it like a grape. If the berries are starting to shrivel they've had some rough times along the way—been allowed to get too hot or too cold, most likely. If they go through 20-degree weather they'll be affected, but heat is the worst offender—like if they sit on a tarmac."

In general, however, barring temperature damage, and once the leaves are off the branch, ilex is a sturdy product that can last the whole season long. "I like to make a vase of it by itself," says Ginny. "There's nothing prettier." ❁