

LIVING

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Yuletide's winter roots

From the English holly to Mexico's bright red poinsettias, plants and trees have become part of Christmas tradition

For an increasing number of people, Christmas has become a time to reflect upon the significance of the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. This key celestial event means we've turned the corner of the year, and slowly but surely, the days will once again grow longer.

Lovers of plants, especially, can rest assured that spring is a mere 12 weeks away and with it, another season of gardening.

In the meantime, why not turn our attention to the stories, legends and natural history of the various plants that are part and parcel of the holiday season, many of which have strong connections to the winter solstice and other pagan traditions. The word "pagan" is simply a generic term for practitioners of a number of pre-Christian faiths. It comes from the Latin for "country dweller." Pagan faith has always been linked to a strong sense of locality and to the cycles of the changing seasons. It is therefore unfortunate that the word has taken on such negative connotations in many circles.

The use of English holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) for holiday decorations might be the oldest tradition. A European species, English holly has evergreen leaves with sharp spines on their edges. It exists in both tree and shrub form. For pre-Christian pagan Romans, holly was considered the plant of the god Saturn, celebrated at the Feast of Sol Invictus on Dec. 25. As a result, European holly has always traditionally had a strong association with Christmas.

Many Celtic customs were also closely linked to this species. Because it retained its leaves all year around, the Celts considered it a sacred tree and "the ruler of winter." The leaves were believed to afford magical protection against evil spirits and were often worn as hair adornments during solstice rituals.

At the same time, Celtic tradition and mythology also honoured the oak tree. In fact, the "Oak King" and the "Holly King" were seen as twin brothers in a never-ending fight for supremacy. However, unlike holly, oaks are deciduous and shed their leaves. In the fall, the Celts marveled at how the holly trees suddenly stood out prominently against their leafless neighbours. The Oak King at this time had lost all its leaves and stood defeated. However, with the arrival of the winter solstice, the tide would begin to turn in the oak's favour. With lengthening days, his power would grow, reaching its zenith at the summer solstice when, clad in full leaf, he would totally hide the smaller holly trees. In the following weeks, however, as days would begin to shorten, the dominance of the oak would start to



Winterberry holly, shown here, and mountain holly are two species of holly that are native to the Kawarthas. Their bright red berries last well into the winter, but unlike English holly its bright green leaves don't stay year-round. Drew Monkman photo

wane until he was once again leafless. Ironically, whenever either king would reach his dominance at summer or winter solstice, he would be doomed to be supplanted by the other.

Two species of holly are actually native to the Kawarthas. They are the mountain holly (*Nemopanthus mucronatus*) and the winterberry holly (*Ilex verticillata*). The bright red berries of the winterberry are definitely one of the visual treats of late fall and early winter. Standing out prominently against the greys and browns of wetland edges, they offer some of the few splashes of colour to be found at this time of year. However, unlike the European holly, the winterberry holly drops its leaves in the fall. Fortunately, its gleaming red berries remain on the branches well into winter. In recent years, winterberry holly has become a favourite element of holiday centerpieces, wreathes and window boxes.

Winterberry holly bushes can be purchased from nurseries and make an excellent landscape plant. However, you will have to buy both a male and a female plant for pollination to take place. In addition to providing visual interest to the winter landscape, this holly will sometimes attract songbirds in winter such as robins and, if you live in the country, maybe even bluebirds.

Mistletoe, too, has long been associated with Christmas. Like English holly, it has evergreen leaves. The Celts believed that mistletoe had life-giving powers and bestowed fertility. This might

stem from the fact that mistletoe berries ripen at the time of the winter solstice, the birth of the new year. One legend states that Druids, the priests of the Celts, would cut mistletoe from oak trees with a golden sickle and catch the branches before they touched the ground. The Druids believed that a potion made from mistletoe would allow barren animals to give birth, and that the plant was a remedy against all poisons.

The modern Christmas significance of mistletoe is of Scandinavian origin. It is said that if enemies met by chance under a mistletoe in a forest, they would set down their arms and declare a truce until the next day. This tradition of peace-making later extended to quarreling husbands and wives and eventually evolved into the custom of kissing under a branch of mistletoe.

Part of mistletoe's allure lies in the fact that it is a partially parasitic plant which grows on and within the branches of other trees. It uses the host tree for both water and mineral nutrients. Although it initially might seem like a pest, some types of mistletoe have been recently recognized as "keystone species." This term refers to an organism that has a disproportionately strong influence over its ecological community and therefore enhances biodiversity. Mistletoe is a source of food for many animals and provides important nesting habitat to a variety of birds. Some mistletoe hosts, such as juniper, actually produce more seeds when mistletoe is pre-

sent.

The name mistletoe was originally applied to *Viscum album* (European mistletoe), the only species native to Europe and Great Britain. However, the word was later extended to other related species such as *Phoradendron serotinum*, the mistletoe of eastern North America. This species can be found as far north as New Jersey but does not extend into Canada. Both the European and North American species have oval, evergreen leaves borne in pairs along a woody stem, and white, waxy berries which grow in dense clusters. In the U.S., *Phoradendron serotinum* is commercially harvested for Christmas decorations.

The Christmas tree, of course, is by far the most popular plant of the holiday season. To ancient peoples, evergreen trees seemed to have magical powers that allowed them to withstand the rigors of winter. While everything else was leafless or dead, evergreens remained green. They therefore became symbolic of the vigour of the life force. The tradition of decorating the trees is believed to have had its beginnings in pre-Christian times, possibly originating with ancient Germanic tribes who would tie fruit and attach candles to evergreen tree branches. The candles were lit to celebrate the fest of light (Lichtfest) at the time of the winter solstice.

The fir is seen by many as the quintessential Christmas tree. Part of the reason may stem from its long association with Christianity.

In the eighth century, St. Boniface dedicated the fir tree to the infant Jesus. The triangular shape of the tree was used to explain the concept of the Trinity, while the continuous green represented the everlasting hope of mankind.

In eastern North America, the balsam fir is particularly popular at Christmas. It has a beautiful pyramidal form, an attractive, dark green colour, and long-lasting needles which exude a wonderful balsamic fragrance. The smell of balsam fir almost immediately evokes the memory of Christmases past. Moose and whitetail deer browse the foliage, while a variety of birds eat the seeds. The spruce grouse actually dines on the needles. By buying a real tree, you are actually helping wildlife since the plantations provide prime habitat for many bird species.

In more recent years, the poinsettia, a plant native to Mexico, has also become a symbol of the holiday season. A charming legend tells of a poor little girl who could not afford a gift for the Christmas Eve service. She was told, however, that any humble gift, if given with love, would suffice. Taking this advice to heart, she gathered a handful of weeds from the roadside. Carefully arranging them on the altar, the child knelt down and watched as a Christmas miracle occurred: the weeds bloomed into a beautiful plant of brilliant red and green before the eyes of the entire congregation. Pepita had picked poinsettias. This legend also explains the common Mexican name for poinsettias – Flores de Noche Buena or Flowers of the Holy Night.

A misconception about poinsettias is that the leaves are poisonous. This is not true. A research study conducted at Ohio State University revealed that no part of the poinsettia is in any way toxic or poisonous.

Poinsettias are also interesting botanically. The red we admire is not actually a flower but rather a colourful whorl of modified leaves called bracts. The actual poinsettia flower is small, green or yellow in colour, and situated in the middle of the bracts. The flowers actually resemble little vases filled with stamens and, projecting up through the middle, a pistil that will bear a seed pod at its base. On the side of each "vase" you will notice a yellow cup-like gland. It is full of a very sweet, sticky nectar that serves to attract pollinators like ants.

Poinsettias belong to one of the most commercially-important plant families, the spurge. This family includes rubber trees, manioc and the castor bean. In the Kawarthas, we have at least two species of spurge, namely cypress and leafy spurge, both of which are non-native.

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