



# The History of Holly and Ivy

Holly (*Ilex*) and ivy (*Hedera helix*) have been used as winter decorations since ancient times. Adorning homes with these plants freshened the air and their greenery reminded occupants of the coming spring. While the cold, dark days of winter turned much of the landscape dreary, many varieties of holly and ivy remained green year round, signifying eternal life, and the bright red berries of some holly plants were cheerful spots of color.

Additionally, holly trees and shrubs and the ornamental vine ivy were each believed to have magical properties. In many ancient cultures, the howling, icy winds in the dark nights of winter were believed to be ghosts and demons. Decorating with holly and ivy was thought to ward off these evil spirits.

Holly has long been associated with winter holidays. Early Europeans used holly as ornamentation during their winter solstice celebrations. The winter solstice, which occurs in late December in the northern hemisphere, was the longest night of the year and signified the gradual lengthening of days and coming spring — a cause for celebration. In Norse mythology, holly was associated with Thor, god of thunder, and holly plants grown by the home were thought to prevent lightning strikes. Ancient Romans used holly as decor during Saturnalia, a festival dedicated to Saturn, god of agriculture and husbandry. Holly's symbolism of the new season made it an appropriate and colorful ornament for winter festivities.

The use of ivy during winter also goes back thousands of years. The fact that ivy, like some hollies, stayed green throughout the year led some to believe it had magical properties and led to its use as home decor in the winter months. It too, symbolized eternal life, rebirth and the spring season. In some cultures, ivy was a symbol of marriage and friendship, perhaps due to its tendency to cling. In ancient Rome, ivy was associated with Bacchus (known as Dionysus in Greek mythology), god of wine and revelry. Accordingly, it was sometimes used as trimming in ancient festivals. Though not as popular as holly, ivy was still used in festivals held during winter by many cultures.

Over time, many customs from pagan (non-Christian) celebrations were incorporated by Christians into religious holidays. For a period, ivy was banished as decor by Christians due to its ability to grow in shade, which led to its association with secrecy and debauchery. Nevertheless, the custom of decorating with holly and ivy during Christian holidays was eventually accepted. Religious meaning was later attributed to the physical properties of holly, in particular. Its sharp leaves were said to symbolize Christ's crown of thorns and its red berries

the blood he shed.

Today, holly and ivy are still used in our celebration of modern Christmas. They are often used in the creation of Christmas wreaths, boughs and other trimmings. While belief in their mystical powers may have dissipated, nonetheless they remain beautiful decorations for the holiday home.

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