

Virginia Cut Holly Production: Planning and Site Selection

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Introduction

There is no substitute for careful planning when dealing with a long-term crop such as cut holly. While evergreen hollies mature in ten to twelve years, deciduous hollies take only three to four years before producing berries. Initial plant size, plus cultural practices, will determine berry production time.

Consider many factors before deciding whether to grow cut holly. If you are willing to invest in land, equipment and labor for a crop that will take several years before harvest, ask yourself the following questions. Are you willing or able to:

- accept losses due to drought or natural causes, or install an irrigation system?
- protect your hollies from animals such as deer and rabbits?
- control weeds and grass that compete for water and nutrients?
- monitor your hollies frequently during the growing season for indications of insect or disease problems?
- develop and maintain a good record-keeping system for materials, equipment and labor?
- develop a labor pool for holly harvesting?
- devote time in November and December to harvest and market your cut holly?

If you answer “yes” to all of the above questions, you have the potential to be a successful holly orchardist.

Planning Your Holly Orchard

Once you’ve decided to establish an orchard for cut holly production, other items should be considered:

- How much land can you plant?
- What land preparation is necessary?
- What soil type (sand, loam, clay) exists, and what is the soil’s acidity (pH) and nutrient status?
- Does the land have topographic limitations (steep slopes, wet areas etc.)?
- Which species should be grown? Are both evergreen and deciduous hollies feasible?
- Where can you obtain holly plants for lining out?
- What specialized equipment is needed for planting, maintenance and harvesting?
- How should trees be spaced to accommodate maintenance and harvest equipment?
- What materials (herbicides, pesticides, fertilizers) are needed?
- How much investment will be required before a return is realized?
- How and to whom can you market your cut holly?

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An orchard of mature American holly plants.

Have a soil test run for the category “Tree Nursery.” Fertilize your soil based on the test results. If potassium and phosphorus are recommended, incorporate them preplant. A moderately acid pH (5.5-6.5) is desirable. If the acid level is too high, raise the Ph with lime.

- If the land was previously farmed, consider the influence of herbicides used in the past on your hollies. If herbicides will be used in site preparation and/or vegetation control, soil type will have an influence on use rate depending on the soil’s sand vs. clay content.

Site Selection

Orchard location will be one of your first decisions. As with most crops, the ideal land on which to grow holly trees is good agricultural land with a loamy soil, good water-holding capacity and good drainage.

Site selection depends on which holly species you decide to produce, the physical characteristics of your land, and less tangible features such as labor and markets.

Evergreen hollies need level to gently sloping land with good drainage. Deciduous hollies can be planted in less well drained soil. Production of evergreen species will generally be limited to the warmer parts of Virginia (hardiness zones 7 and 8), while the more cold tolerant deciduous species can be produced anywhere in Virginia.

A Virginia orchard of deciduous hollies.

A site that receives full sun is ideal. Plants should be protected from winter winds by windbreaks. Areas where frost is heavy or cold air settles (generally low lying) should be avoided to prevent flower bud damage.

Whether you currently own land, or plan to lease or purchase new land, the following are recommended:

- Obtain a soil survey map from your Virginia Cooperative Extension agent or local district soil conservation office. Determine soil types and look up the types of plants that will grow well in those soils.



- Locate the orchard near the owner’s or manager’s residence. Frequent monitoring is important to reduce pest problems, maintain vegetation, and reduce vandalism.

One final consideration—if you don’t own land, find a wholesale or a choose-and-cut Christmas tree grower, and ask to lease part of his or her land. Look at the marketing possibility for both of you!