

Virginia Cut Holly Production: Pruning, Harvesting, and Marketing

Bonnie L. Appleton, Extension Specialist, Hampton Roads Agricultural Research and Extension Center

Ann D. Spivey, Graduate Student, Hampton Roads Agricultural Research and Extension Center

Susan C. French, Extension Technician, Hampton Roads Agricultural Research and Extension Center

Brilliant red berries make evergreen and deciduous hollies desirable as Christmas greenery. Cut holly berries and evergreen leaves are cold tolerant and retain much of their shape and color even when partially dry.

Holly cultivars vary as to the age at which the first berried branches (sprays) will be ready to harvest. On average, evergreen hollies mature in ten to twelve years while deciduous hollies take only three to four years before producing berried sprays for harvest.

Premature harvesting (when plants or sprays are too small) can reduce plant vigor and future production. Along with plant age, berry ripening also depends on seasonal climatic (amount of rain and sun, etc.) and growing (weed competition, fertility level) conditions. Holly berries will not continue to redden after the sprays are cut.



Harvesting evergreen holly in an orchard.

Pruning

Pruning for size control and growth direction can often be combined with pruning for spray harvest:

- Control height and force new growth on older wood by cutting back the central leader. Cut to a height convenient for harvest.
- Remove lateral branches that grow inward to keep plants open for light penetration and air circulation.
- Remove 1/4 to 1/3 of berried sprays on all lateral branches to encourage branching.
- Prune above strong, outward-facing buds to encourage growth away from tree center.
- Leave lower limbs with inferior sprays to suppress weed growth and prevent close mowing near trunks.

Harvesting

When enough berried sprays develop to justify harvesting, cut lightly the first few years. Light harvest encourages trees to increase in size and quantity of foliage and/or berries produced.

Hollies tolerate severe harvesting, but evergreen hollies in particular tend to be out-of-production (have few harvestable sprays) the following two to three years. When harvesting, cut sprays from over the entire tree, removing an equal amount from each branch.

Handling Cut Sprays

Cut holly is a perishable product. Its bright, fresh appearance deteriorates with exposure to dry air due to defoliation (leaf drop) and desiccation (leaf browning).

Keeping cut holly alive will help maintain its best appearance.

In the field when harvesting, stand holly sprays in buckets of water if possible, or put them into plastic bags and hold them out of direct sunlight and wind. If you can't ship within a few hours of harvest, hold the holly sprays in cold storage (near 32 degrees F.). Hormone treatment prevents defoliation for about two weeks, if holly is held in cold storage.

HANDLE HOLLY SPRAYS WITH CARE! Rough handling causes berries to drop, and cracks and scratches to develop on leaves of evergreen hollies. Small injuries on leaves will form discolored areas during storage.



Holly ready for shipping in a plastic-lined box. This helps to maintain the humidity.

Hormone Treatment

To help extend the life of cut holly, use the hormone alpha naphthalene acetic acid (NAA). Purchase a commercial preparation of NAA commonly used to delay apple drop.

Prepare a concentration of NAA equal to 40 parts per million by using four times the recommended strength for spraying apples. Apply the NAA by dipping entire cut holly sprays into the solution for a few seconds, then drain. Do not allow cut holly to soak in the solution (dip only).

To maintain humidity, store and ship cut holly sprays in cartons lined with moisture barriers (polyethylene film, foil or wax-lined paper) to maintain humidity.

Holly Marketing Ideas

There are many different uses and markets for cut holly. Florists combine holly with flowers and fruit in arrangements. Retailers and Christmas tree lot operators sell cut holly in wreaths and swags (flat arrangements of greenery for doors), and as boughs for customer decorations.

Wreaths are generally the most popular holly product. You can make holly wreaths on common-sized wire rings 8", 10", and 12" in diameter, or in larger diameters for special orders.

Make swags from holly alone (including deciduous and evergreen mixed), or combine with other evergreens such as pine, boxwood, fir and Leyland cypress. Use cones and ribbons for added decoration.

Sell small hollies as potted plants. Customers can use them inside during the holiday season, and then plant them into the landscape.

Alternatives to Red and Green

Use evergreen holly cultivars with white or silver variegated leaves to add color to green arrangements, or in mixed floral arrangements. Use yellow-berried evergreen hollies for Thanksgiving and golden wedding anniversary decorations. Evergreen and deciduous hollies with yellow and orange berries offer additional possibilities.

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