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Exploring Our Little Corner of the World with the Galiano Naturalists

by Mike Hoebel

At Christmas time many of us decorate our homes with branches of holly, delighting in the shiny, prickly-edged green leaves and bright red berries of this shrubby tree. If you don't happen to have a holly tree in your garden, it's easy to find a "wild" holly on Galiano. What are these trees, and where do they come from?

There are many species of holly found around the world, and North America alone boasts perhaps a dozen native species. However, no holly species are native to British Columbia, and the holly trees you find growing in the woods and fields on the Gulf Islands are garden escapees. Most of these plants are English Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), which is native to the British Isles and central and southern Europe. Cultivars of this species and of American Holly (*Ilex opaca*) are the most popular types of holly grown in gardens in the Pacific Northwest. American Holly, which is native to the eastern United States, has duller leaves and more spines than English Holly. Both English Holly and American Holly are grown commercially for Christmas decorations from Oregon to British Columbia.

Hollies have separate sexes, and only female holly trees bear the red berries. These berries are eagerly eaten by Robins, Varied Thrushes, Cedar Waxwings, and Northern Flickers, and the birds often defecate the seeds far away from the parent tree. Although birds consume holly berries without ill effect, the berries are listed as toxic to humans, especially children.

Holly seeds germinate readily in our climate, and survival of the young trees is good, even in relatively dense forest. This is the problem: the non-native holly species compete with native plants for space, light, water, and nutrients. Although they are slow-growing they are also relatively long-lived, so once established they persist in the environment. In fact, English Holly is classified as an "invasive alien" plant species all the way from California to British Columbia. For example, this species is included on California's Exotic Plant Pest List, and the city of Eugene, Oregon prohibits the planting of English Holly on city property. Closer to home, the District



of Saanich includes English Holly on its list of the top invasive plant species. As with other invasive plants, Garry Oak meadows are particularly vulnerable.

There are several large "domestic" English Holly trees growing on my own property, which were planted many years ago by a previous owner. There are also a number of "wild" holly trees growing in my immediate neighbourhood, thanks to the birds. As a birdwatcher I have mixed feelings about holly trees growing wild in the Gulf Islands. They are attractive plants and they provide valuable winter food for several bird species, but they are also potentially a significant problem for our native vegetation. If we are going to keep

growing holly trees in our gardens, we should make an effort to remove holly trees that have gone "wild".

The Galiano Naturalists welcome new participants to join us in learning more about our natural environment. Please contact Pam at 539-3322 or by email (galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com) for more information. To kick the New Year off right there will be Naturalists' hike up Mt. Galiano on January 2nd. We'll be meeting at the Lord Road trailhead at 10 am. Everyone welcome.