

# NEWSLETTER

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**HOLLY:**  
A sacred and  
symbolic plant.  
*Find out why we decorate  
with it at Christmas time.*

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# HOLLY:

## A symbolic plant at Christmas time



Decorating our homes for Christmas is hugely anticipated each year and sensational flashy displays are now common. However, earlier generations used whatever natural materials were at their disposal to decorate their homes for the festive season. Hence holly *Ilux Aquifolium*, a readily-available plant (and sometimes ivy), was used to brighten up doors and windows and add some cheer.

The decoration was vegetal, and the shape of the edges and the presence of vibrant red berries brought a touch of magic to Christmas. In fact, the more berries the holly had, the more generous and prosperous the new year was going to be. It was a sign of happiness, joy and celebration. Holly was considered to be a sacred plant by the Druids – cutting down a holly tree would bring bad luck. In contrast, hanging the plant in homes was believed to bring good luck and protection. It was also believed that holly would protect homes against lightning strikes.

Nowadays, despite the often flashy displays, the tradition of displaying holly for Christmas has remained, the holly wreath on the door being most popular. Considered as a protection, it ensures peace and happiness in the home.

Christians consider holly symbolic of Jesus Christ.

A holly's pointed leaves symbolize the crown of thorns placed on Jesus' head before he died on the cross. Interestingly, Holly is known as *christdorn* in German, meaning "Christ thorn." The red berries represent the blood that Jesus shed on the cross. Legend states that holly berries were originally white, but that the blood Christ shed for the sins of humankind stained the berries forever red. However only the female plants can produce berries. In order for this to occur, a male plant must be near a female plant for the process of pollination to take place. Insects, like bees, help cross-pollinate female hollies, transferring pollen from the male to the female plants.

Holly's berries are toxic to humans but are a vital source of food for birds such as thrushes and blackbirds. Holly berries, which ripen in early winter, typically contain four seeds each.

The birds that eat these seeds help scatter them for germination, aiding the growth of new holly plants. The berries are poisonous, while the green leaves have been used in herbal remedies for centuries for various medical conditions like dizziness, fever and hypertension, though there is little medical proof of the plant's effectiveness. Holly wood is hard and compact, making it excellent for carving; it's sometimes used to make chess pieces and walking sticks.

There are, however, some difficulties when working with holly. The bark can be difficult to retain. When seasoned it is a dark colour and covered in a network of greyish raised ridges.

So let us continue to "Deck the halls with boughs of holly" and keep this tradition alive even longer!

### References:

Guide-ireland.com

Nature.com

Irishfolklore.wordpress.com



### DID YOU KNOW?

There was an old tradition, that when the decorations came down after the 6th of January, the holly was burned on the fire. However, some was retained, and used on the fire on Shrove Tuesday. This was, as always, for good luck.

### A brief history of the surname

## ROBINSON

Mac Roibín *M'Robyn*, *M'Roben*, MacRobin, Cribbin, Cribbon, Cribbins, Robinson, Robbinson, Robbins; 'son of Robin' (diminutive of Robert).<sup>1</sup>

**Robustún, Robusún: Robuston, Robertson, Robinson:** This surname, which is as old at least as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, seems to be merely, a phonetic rendering of the English surname Robertson.<sup>2</sup>

**Robinson:** Well over half of the Robinson families in Ireland are in Ulster where Robinsons arrived from Scotland and England with the 17<sup>th</sup> century settlement of the province. Settlers of the name also came in lesser numbers to other parts of Ireland from England where Robinson is one of the twenty commonest surnames.<sup>3</sup>

**Robinson:** This English name has in comparatively recent times become very numerous in Ireland, especially in Ulster.<sup>4</sup> Of the 217 Robinson births registered in Ireland in 1890 – including variants – 29 occurred in Leinster, 9 were in Munster, 168 occurred in Ulster, while 11 were in Connacht. The surname was principally found in Antrim, Down, Dublin, Armagh and Tyrone.

<sup>1</sup> Extract taken from 'Irish Names and Surnames' by Rev. Patrick Woulfe, (p.403)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, (p.664)

<sup>3</sup> Extract taken from 'Irish Family Names' by Brian De Breffny, (p.170)

<sup>4</sup> Extract taken from 'The Surnames of Ireland' by Edward MacLysaght, (p259)

### Brief history of the townland of

## GLENCULLEN/GLENCULLIN

(*Cleann Cuilinn*, glen of the holly)

Located in the south-east of the parish of Ballycastle. Bounded on the north by Sralagagh West; east by Sralagagh East and Aghoo; south by Ballinglen and Kilfian parish; and west by Glenora and Sralagagh East. It contains 1,000 acres, 1 rood, 1 perch\*. The property of Lord Arran, and held on a lease by John Perkins, Agent, who has it sublet to one farmer at the yearly rent of £80 for the whole townland. All uncultivated except a portion along the Glencullin River. South of this river is a stream, called Fiddaunafearbreague.

\* There are 40 perches in a rood, and 4 roods in an acre.

Extract from Ordnance Survey Namebooks of 1838