

by J. Lawrence Smith

## Holly Symbolism Ancient

*Deck the halls with boughs of holly*” are words to a favorite Christmas carol. Even though the symbolism of holly is associated with Christmas, its use for decorations originated in ancient times.

Trees and shrubs that remained green throughout the year, such as spruce, pines and holly, were regarded by people of long ago as having qualities lacking in other plants. Holly kept its leaves in winter and seemed to possess a spark of eternity.

The Romans decorated their houses and temples with holly during the winter feast of Saturnalia. The Druids held the shrub as sacred and used it in religious rites with the belief it warded off evil spirits.

The Pilgrim settlers of Massachusetts found the American variety in the woods of New England that was much like English holly in appearance. Holly soon became a part of Christmas celebrations among all colonists of English background.

A superstitious belief associated with holly was that it played a part in romance. A young woman who slept with a leaf under her pillow was believed to have a dream about her future husband.

Holly is found growing in West Virginia in a swath of counties down through the central part of the state. Numerous places are named for it, such as Holly River in Webster County and Holly Meadows on Cheat River in Tucker County.

The berries are a favorite food of many wildlife species such as the Cedar Waxwing. They are most palatable after being softened by freezing and thawing.

When you find holly with its red berries among the green of hemlock or spruce, just remember here is a shrub rooted deep in ancient belief.

