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Gardener Portrait: Bill Cannon

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Bill Cannon admiring an *Ilex X 'Wye River'*

Talk about collecting plants for winter interest! Our horticultural friend, **Bill Cannon**, has devoted his Brewster MA property to growing the most varied and unusual varieties of Hollies (*Ilex*) of anyone we know in New England. He truly has created a **Holly Arboretum**, home to over 2000 *Ilex* plants, including 300 different species and cultivars.

How and when did we first meet Bill? It was perhaps a decade ago. Chris and I were at a plant sale at the [Tower Hill Botanical Garden](#) in Worcester MA, (*you often discover the coolest plants at these events*), when we came across the booth of a charming gentleman with twinkling hazel eyes who was selling unusual varieties of holly. The gentleman, **Bill Cannon**, had brought a sampling of young starts from his vast collection. Of course our eyes bee-lined to the perfectly shaped glossy foliage of an English Holly, *Ilex aquifolium*, but having lost a few in our zone 6A garden, we hesitated. Bill encouraged us to try again, which we did, and went home with a new selection, a hybrid of English and Perny holly called *Ilex aquipernyi* “**Dr. Kassab**”, plus planting tips. We heeded the tips Bill provided: extra protection the first couple of seasons, plant in well drained soil and out of drying winter winds. We are pleased to report that despite experiencing a cruel winter or two, “**Dr. Kassab**” has formed a slender 6’ pyramid of small dark green perfect foliage adorned with luscious red fruit. Not bad for an almost zone 7 plant.



One of Bill's gorgeous wreaths

Our paths crossed several years later, when I became a member of the Horticultural Club of Boston, and found Bill, a longtime member, sitting next to me at one of the meetings. It was a special December Holiday meeting, and Bill had brought in as his fund raising donation a most beautiful Holly wreath, featuring so many of the unusual cultivars of the genus he knows and grows so well. He explained that he keeps quite busy in late November and December filing orders for these gorgeous wreaths, using material from his holly "farm". When I mentioned I would love to see the "farm", he graciously said to please come, call first, but not to wait too late in the season, since the robins would be visiting soon and the berries might be all gone.



Ilex X 'Dragon Lady'

I was unable to make the visit that December, or the following year or two either. Suddenly, it seemed, this year, our little *Ilex* '**Dr. Kassab**' had come into her own in our garden. I thought of Bill and his holly gardens. Chris and I had to make a visit to Cape Cod to see Bill's exotic hollies. The weekend before Thanksgiving we gave Bill a call, and were in luck. He would be around and could spare some time from his wreath making to give us a tour.



Ilex attenuata 'Alagold'

Our visit was perfectly timed. The Sunday afternoon weather was mild plus the Hollies were loaded with berries. What a treat and an education! Bill's property on Main St. originally belonged to his father, who was a florist and who had, 30-40 years before, planted many boxwood and hollies on the lot for cutting and arranging. (These older trees and shrubs still provide Bill with much cut material). Bill had the family genes for growing plants, and went to UMASS for floriculture. He was employed as the nursery manager for Kennedy's Country Gardens for years, and also taught horticulture and gardening courses in Adult Education Programs. His passion for the genus *Ilex* grew, and after becoming a member of the **Holly Society of America**, he was elected president in 2007-2008. He is now "retired", but runs a micro nursery on his property, propagating many of the unusual Hollies he has acquired over the years, which he sells to discerning plant collectors. He continues to lecture on gardening topics, especially on his favorite genus *Ilex*.



Ilex cornuta 'Berries Jubilee'

A few of Bill's tips on growing hollies are:

1. Most people know you need male and female hollies to cross pollinate for berry set. What you should also know is that the male cultivar needs to be in bloom at the same time as the female.
2. Hollies bloom on old wood, just like mophead hydrangeas. If you cut lots of branches for winter decorating, be aware that you've cut off the potential fruit set for next year.
3. Hardiness of many species of *Ilex* has not been adequately tested. Experiment on your property with some of the warmer zone cultivars. (We did!)

Bill can be contacted at ilexbc@verizon.net, if you are interested in scheduling a lecture or acquiring some of his rare hollies. He takes advance orders for his beautiful wreaths, but there may still be time to get your request in.

If this article has piqued your interest in growing unusual hollies, why not join [the Holly Society of America](#) ? It's a great resource, both for information and acquiring new and unusual plants.

And a few more from Bill's collection:



Ilex pedunculosa



Ilex aquifolium aureovariegata