

TENNESSEE Home & Farm

AGRICULTURE

Holly Days at UT Arboretum

By [Nancy Dorman-Hickson](#) | November 20, 2014



Maneuvering his SUV along a bumpy maintenance road in the 250-acre [University of Tennessee Arboretum](#) in Oak Ridge, project director Kevin Hoyt points out the highlights: a valley of viburnums, wetlands teeming with turtles and frogs, a stand of dwarf conifers. A groundhog darts into the base of a hollow poplar trunk at the sound of the vehicle's engine.

"And here we are at the holly collection," says Hoyt, parking at what appears, from the roadside, to be an unobtrusive plot of greenery high atop a hill. "This is our signature."

A few steps into the landscaped space, it is obvious that this is no ordinary assemblage of evergreens. Gigantic, 25-foot-tall Ilex hybrids tower over American, Chinese and Japanese species. Wire pens shelter smaller plants, including an Iranian holly seldom grown in the southeast, from hungry critters. An entire section is dedicated to Tennessee hollies with names like Bessie Smith, Memphis Bell and Volunteer Orange, while another showcases a grouping of English and European cultivars. In all, there are 250 holly shrubs and trees in various sizes, from Possumhaw and Inkberry to Long-stalk and Lusterleaf.

Inspired by the late Harold Elmore, a Tennessee horticulturist, chemist and engineer who became such an international expert on the prickly leaf plants that he earned the nickname "Mr. Holly," the Elmore Holly Collection began with a few specimens in the hollow that now houses the man-made wetlands and was moved to its current location about 30 years ago. Two of the arboretum's 10 walking trails filter into the garden.

In October, the 50-year-old arboretum started work on a 2,400-square-foot auditorium, slated for completion in June 2015. Hoyt notes the construction phase may prove a bit noisy and messy, but the serenity of the arboretum will be restored as soon as possible.

The larger 11,500-acre field research lab known as the [UT Forest Resources AgResearch and Education Center](#) serves as an outdoor classroom for modern forestry practices, wildlife management and environmental stewardship.

The arboretum's holly collection allows UT scientists to conduct experiments, such as breeding drought-resistant plants and producing certain shapes for home and commercial landscaping.



Recognized by the [Holly Society of America](#) as an official test garden, it has also become a major draw for the 40,000 nature lovers who visit each year.

"It has a very big appeal," Hoyt says. "It adds big-time to our outreach because there are so many people who are interested in holly all over the country. People come here specifically to see the holly collection. It's a way of showcasing hollies from around the world and those native to the U.S. and Tennessee."

Twice a year, volunteers from the Arboretum Society Holly Task Force trim the plants, remove dead ones, add fresh mulch and build protective fencing. (The berries are toxic to humans but not to some animals.) Extremely hot summers and the strong deer population can take a toll on the perennials.

"We do not take a holly out until we know for sure that it's gonna die. This one's having a tough time right here," Hoyt says, motioning to a scraggly specimen. "We give 'em the benefit of the doubt and hope they hold on."

Still, Hoyt says, "Hollies will grow just about anywhere. They'll grow out in the open. They'll grow in the understory. They'll grow down in the marsh area. They'll grow across a gamut of ecosystems and plant zones."



When winter comes and the arboretum's deciduous trees shed their leaves, the holly collection is at its most beautiful, especially when it snows. Bright crimson berries offer a stark contrast against the white flakes and the green, glossy leaves, while cardinals, cedar waxwings and goldfinches add more bursts of color to the wonderland scene.

"It's just the whole holiday feel," Hoyt says. "It's not hot. You don't have to worry about ticks and bugs. We don't get an enormous amount of snow here, but even if we get a light dusting, it's a great place to walk, with the briskness of the air, the freshness. You're likely to see deer or at least their footprints in the snow.

"People tend to come to East Tennessee in the wintertime to go to Dollywood or the Smokies," he adds. "Well, we've got this nice little oasis right between Knoxville and Oak Ridge. They can come out and take a nice brisk walk in the arboretum. We're a place for all seasons."



If You Go...

The UT Arboretum grounds are open to the public from 8 a.m. until sunset except for major holidays. For more information, visit forestry.tennessee.edu.

Deck the Halls (and Other Things)

Long before holly became a shining symbol of Christmas, the ancient druids hung sprigs of the spiky plant in their homes to bring good luck, protect against lightning strikes and fend off evil spirits. Today, Christians believe the vibrant red berries represent the crucifixion and often use the boughs in holiday decorations. Here are a few simple ones:

-
- **Candle holder:** Apply a thin layer of clear-drying adhesive to a square glass pillar, and quickly press holly branches of different sizes on all four sides until covered. Attach a bow to the base.
 - **Wreath:** Poke the ends of holly branches into a foam wreath, alternating the position and size of the pieces. Add red and green ribbons and glitter.
 - **Centerpiece:** Fill a large vase with water, and arrange holly stalks for a foyer or dining room table.
 - **Swag:** Tuck tall branches between a curtain rod and the wall, or fasten the holly to the rod with florist's wire.
 - **Wall hanging:** Cut a half-dozen holly branches to a similar size, bundle them together with florist's wire or a rubber band, and tie a large patterned bow to the top.

TAGS [HOLLY](#) [PLANTS](#) [UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE](#)

