

Wood of The Month



American Holly
end grain view

Ilex opaca – American Holly

As we come upon the season of “Mistletoe and Holly” (with music in the background), I thought we would look at the wood for the occasion, Holly. The name holly is Old English for “holy,” perhaps referring to its use at Christmas time. American holly is a native plant that ranges from as far north as Massachusetts and Pennsylvania and south into Florida and Texas. It grows naturally in a wide range of soils and climates from the harsh winters in the mountains where the soil may be shallow to the heat and humidity of the beach with its shallow and salty water table. The best growth and largest plants can be found in the rich bottomlands near rivers and swamps. It is native to Missouri down in the boot heel portion of the state. It is a tree that commonly grows 40 to 50 feet in height and can reach 80 feet. It is an evergreen famous for its pointed, leathery, shiny dark green leaves with bright red berries (which are poisonous if ingested, although not seriously except for children). The trunk of the tree tapers rapidly and may be 1 to 2 feet in diameter and its foliage falls every 3 years in the spring instead of autumn.

The wood is one of the whitest woods known and can range from a bluish gray to pure white or ivory. To get the white colored wood, it has to be cut in the winter and dried quickly. It is moderately hard, close grained and tough without any figure but can have several knots. It is used as an accent wood and inlays of fine furniture, piano keys, and fine turnery and is one of the best woods for ebonizing. Holly is typically used for ornamental and decorative purposes. The wood can be difficult to work but turns well and takes a fine luster. It has a high shrinkage rate, therefore, that characteristic should be considered in use. There no known adverse health effects related to holly in working the wood.

The wood is expensive because of the size of the tree, and because of its primary use of the foliage as decoration, the tree is not harvested for its wood. Therefore, it is not readily available commercially but when available and affordable, it is a delightful wood to turn.

You can read more about American Holly at; [The Wood-database](#) and [Wikipedia.org](#).

Written by – Mel Bryan