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Preserving Cut Holly

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Oregon-grown cut holly is a welcome addition to any winter holiday decoration. The shiny leaves and bright berries add a traditional touch to Christmas festivities and cheer. Using this evergreen foliage, however, depends upon prescribed treatment from the time the holly is cut until it is used in the home.

Cut holly is a perishable product. The quality deteriorates progressively after the holly is removed from the tree. The chief problems are moisture loss and defoliation. Proper harvesting, storage, and shipping methods can increase the effective life of cut holly.

Cut only the best quality holly for decorative use. The leaves should be well colored, most of the berries should be ripe, and both the berries and the foliage should be free of blemishes, scratches, and other types of damage. Cut holly when temperatures are above freezing and when drying wind and strong sunlight will not cause excessive drying. If cut during warm dry weather, holly should be moved into cool, moist storage soon after removal from the tree.

Even with proper storage conditions, holly will begin losing its leaves in seven to ten days. The natural defoliation can be delayed by partial drying, hormone treatment, and cold storage. Successful holly shippers use a combination of the latter two methods.

Partial drying involves letting the holly dry slowly during transit and storage. It is almost impossible, however, to prevent excessive drying and resultant wilting without other precautions.

Hormone treatment involves the use of *alpha-napthalene acetic acid.* Commercial preparations of this hormone are available. When mixed with water, the hormone is used as a dip to help hold the leaves on the cut holly branches. Recommended concentrations vary from 30 to 100 parts per million. Follow instructions on the label.

When the holly is brought in from the trees, it should be washed to remove spray residues, dust, and other contaminants. Holly can be washed in dip tubs or by a directed spray from a hose. When dipping holly in the hormone solution, do not allow it to soak, but merely dip and drain. If considerable holly is to be treated, renew the hormone concentration from time to time. Treat as soon as possible after cutting.

After dipping the holly, drain away the excess moisture and pack holly in strong cardboard cartons lined with moisture-proof paper. Florist's foil, aluminum foil, or plastic-coated freezer paper are satisfactory for lining the shipping boxes. Waxed paper and newspaper can be used, but they are less satisfactory. After packing, fasten the shipping boxes securely and label "perishable."

Store and ship holly by itself. Storing holly in the same area with ripening fruit can result in defoliation due to the ethylene gas given off by the fruit. Ship by as rapid a means as possible, since the less time holly spends in transit the better the quality will be.

Keep in mind that *any* of the treatments mentioned will delay defoliation only for a brief period. Hormone-treated holly will store 14 days at 45° F., almost two months at 32° F., and will freeze at 26° F. Holly is killed at 12° F.

When using treated holly in the home, give it the same care you would give a flower arrangement, i.e., supply water to the cut stems, keep out of drafts and other places which promote dryness, and keep in a cool room if possible. With proper care, hormone-treated holly will keep its quality for several weeks.

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