

# English Holly

*Ilex aquifolium*

Aquifoliaceae or Holly Family

## Weed of Concern: Control Recommended

### Identification Tips

- Large, dense, slow-growing evergreen tree or shrub
- Can reach 15 to 50 feet tall and up to 15 wide
- Can grow as either a single tree or a multi-stemmed thicket
- Leaves are thick, glossy, dark green and wavy, 1-3 inches long
- Leaves usually have sharp spines along the edges although may be smooth on older branches
- Flowers are small, whitish, sweetly scented
- Produces red, yellow or orange berries in the winter

### Biology

- English holly has both male and female plants that are bee pollinated
- Reproduces mainly by seeds that are contained within the berries; birds eat the berries and disperse the seeds to new areas
- Can also spread vegetatively through suckering and layering

### Impacts

- Berries are toxic to humans
- Invades native forest habitats where dense thickets suppress germination and growth of native trees and shrubs
- A glutton for water, holly can prevent surrounding plants from obtaining sufficient moisture

### Distribution

- Found throughout King County from urban landscapes to undisturbed natural areas and native forests
- Grows in shade or sun in well drained soil
- Is grown commercially for decorations and floral arrangements



*It may make a festive holiday decoration, but English holly is not welcomed in natural areas where it crowds out native plants.*



*English holly can grow up to 50 feet tall and be extremely difficult to remove once established.*

### Questions?

King County Noxious Weed Control  
Program Line: **206-477-WEED**  
[www.kingcounty.gov/weeds](http://www.kingcounty.gov/weeds)

## What You Can Do

While there is no legal requirement for eradicating or controlling English holly in King County, the King County Noxious Weed Control Board recognizes this plant as a weed of concern and recommends prevention of spread into natural areas and urban forests.

## Control Methods

In areas where English holly is established and widespread, removal is generally only recommended as part of a larger effort to restore natural landscapes. For uninfested areas, remove encroaching plants as soon as possible to avoid future problems.

**Manual:** Small plants can be dug or pulled up when soil is moist. Be aware that mature trees have deep and extensive roots; digging large holly trees or thickets is labor-intensive and results in considerable soil disturbance if all the roots are removed. Weed wrenches can be used on larger shrubs to pry up the entire plant. If you would like to borrow a weed wrench, please contact our office at 206-296-0290.

**Mechanical:** Cutting holly trees at the base usually results in re-sprouting, but with monitoring and follow up the holly can be suppressed.

**Chemical:** When dealing with large trees or thick stems, chop or cut the holly as close to the ground as possible and apply a herbicide with the active ingredient glyphosate (such as Roundup) directly into the cut portion. Frilling (making deep cuts at 45 degree angles into the tree's bark using an axe or sharp chisel) and pouring glyphosate into the cuts immediately afterward is also effective. **Always follow label rates and instructions.** Monitor for seedlings and root re-sprouting. Foliar herbicide treatment (spraying herbicides directly on the leaves) is not recommended due to holly's thick, waxy leaves which prevent the chemicals from being absorbed. For more information, please contact the King County Noxious Weed Control Program.

## Alternatives to English Holly

English holly's dense evergreen foliage make it a traditional hedgerow shrub in the Pacific Northwest. And its contrasting bright red berries make it a favorite holiday decoration at Christmas

time. But there are alternatives that still provide the benefits of traditional English holly without the drawbacks. For screening and hedging in a sunny site, consider tall Oregon grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*). This native plant grows up to 10 feet tall and produces bright yellow flowers in



Tall Oregon grape is a great alternative.

the spring and blue-black berries in the summer. Another alternative is false holly (*Osmanthus heterophyllus*). This plant looks like holly with variegated evergreen leaves, but it does not produce berries. It grows 15 feet or more, making it ideal for screening. For more alternatives, see the *Garden Wise* booklet produced by the Washington State Noxious Weed Board. Copies may be obtained by calling the King County Noxious Weed Control Program at 206-296-0290 or by going to our website at [www.kingcounty.gov/weeds](http://www.kingcounty.gov/weeds).

Photo courtesy of the Native Plant Landscaping Guide website [www.kingcounty.gov/GoNative](http://www.kingcounty.gov/GoNative)