

# Common Holly

*Ilex aquifolium* Holly Family

## Identification Tips

- Large, dense, slow-growing evergreen tree or shrub
- Can reach 15 to 50 feet tall and up to 15 feet 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

Common holly has both male and female plants that are insect-pollinated. It reproduces mainly by seeds that are contained within the berries; birds eat the berries and disperse the seeds to new areas. It can also spread vegetatively through suckering and layering. Branches can form roots when damaged or lying on the ground.

## Impacts

**Berries are poisonous to humans and pets.** Holly invades forest habitats where dense thickets suppress germination and growth of native trees and shrubs. Leaves produce flammable vapor when heated, causing them to ignite easily. May increase fire risk.

## Distribution

Found throughout King County, from urban landscapes to undisturbed natural areas and native forests. Holly grows in shade or sun in well-drained soil. It's also grown commercially for decorations and floral arrangements. Introduced from Europe.

## What You Can Do

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

## Control Methods

In areas where common holly is established and widespread, removal is generally only recommended as part of a larger effort to restore natural landscapes or to reduce fire risk. 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. For larger plants, weed-wrench-type tools can be used to pry up the plant more easily

## Questions?

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

**Weed of Concern:  
Control Recommended**



*It makes a festive holiday decoration, but common holly is not welcome in natural areas where it crowds out native plants.*



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



*Common holly flowers are small, whitish, and sweetly scented.*

than digging. 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. Weed pullers can be checked out from our office.

**Mechanical:**

Cutting down holly trees usually results in resprouting or suckering and is not recommended. With consistent cutting of regrowth, this method can suppress holly but will not kill the plants, and can result in multi-stemmed thickets.

**Chemical:**

**Follow all local, state and federal rules about applying herbicides.**

**Read and follow label instructions carefully.** Apply a brush control herbicide directly to freshly cut trunks, either by the “cut stump” method (cut the stem close to the ground and coat the outer ring of the freshly cut surface) or by using an injection lance (such as EZ-ject) to insert herbicide capsules around the base of the trunk. Follow the product label directions for the method being used because the effective amount of herbicide varies considerably by product and method. For the cut-stump method, triclopyr is more effective than glyphosate, and for the injection lance, imazapyr capsules are much more effective than glyphosate capsules. Monitor treated trees for several years for regrowth from roots. For more information, contact the Noxious Weed Control Program.



*Common holly invades native forest habitats, where dense thickets suppress germination and growth of native trees and shrubs.*



*Even young holly plants have deep taproots, which makes digging them up hard—and weed pullers extra helpful.*

## Alternatives to Common Holly

For screening and hedging in a sunny site, consider **tall Oregon grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*)**. This native plant grows up to 10 feet tall, producing bright yellow flowers in 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 to 15 feet or more, making it ideal for screening. For more alternatives, see the *Garden Wise* booklet produced by the Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board. Contact us or visit our website to request this booklet or for more information.



*Tall Oregon grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*)*



*False holly (*Osmanthus heterophyllus*)*