

Country Notes for December 2015

The holly and the ivy When they are both full grown Of all the tress that are in the wood The holly bears the crown

This such a well-known and well-loved carol, and the two plants mentioned in the first verse are a significant feature of the Christmas landscape in the countryside. For me, I would much rather see evergreen decorations in in our Christmas homes than plastic or artificial ones. Ivy is used by relatively few people, but I imagine that I am not the only person who loves to see the red berries of holly brightening the inside of our homes at this time of year.

Holly and ivy are also very important for our native wildlife. Being evergreen, they supply a hiding place when the weather is rough or cold for insects and birds in particular. The berries of both also provide important food for birds. Members of the thrush family, which include the blackbird, song thrush, mistle thrush, redwing and fieldfare particularly enjoy feasting on the winter banquet that they provide. Their flowers, especially the flowers of the ivy, are relished earlier in the year by butterflies, in particular members of the Vanessa family, which include small tortoiseshells, peacocks and red admirals.

For me it wouldn't be Christmas without either of these plants. The other significant plant, mistletoe, is also evergreen and this too provides berries for birds greedy for any sustenance at this bleak time of the year.

All three of these plants were brought into homes by the druids long before Christianity, to celebrate the return of light and the sun after the winter solstice on 21st December, when the days begin to slowly get longer again. They were absorbed into the Christian tradition later on.

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