



The garden dating agency

If your holly bush doesn't bear berries, then you might need to give it a helping hand to find a mate

THERE were plenty of holly berries about this Christmas, anyway in my part of the country on the Warwickshire/Oxfordshire borders, but that does not mean, as the old wives' tale says, that we are necessarily going to have a cold winter. It all boils down to sex. With very few exceptions, all hollies are either male or female, cross-pollinated by insects. If a holly produces few if any berries one year it is doubtless because cold winds or excessive wet predominated when they were in flower during spring to early summer. If you have a holly that never produces berries, it is either because it is a male, or an isolated female too far distanced from potential lovers. Under such circumstances you need to create your own dating agency.

You could well choose a 'hedgehog holly' (*Ilex aquifolium* 'Ferox'), or a variety thereof all of which are male, close to a lonely lady. These are small and slower growing species, to all intents and purposes a 'dwarf' holly with, interestingly enough, small spines on the lower and upper surfaces of their leaves. *I. a.* 'Ferox Argentea' has cream margined leaves if you're after a showier splash of winter colour. There do exist, however, two self-fertile hermaphrodites, namely 'J.C. van Tol' and 'Pyramidalis', useful plants if you happen to have a small garden. Sometimes the names of holly varieties can be confusing. I am thinking particularly of perversely named *Ilex aquifolium* 'Silver Queen' which happens to be a male, and *Ilex altaclarensis* 'Golden King', a female.

Hollies make valuable winter plants in the garden even without their berries and can also be cut into topiary shapes using shears. For the neatest shape you will need to start clipping with shears in early summer which will result in far fewer berries as most of the flowers and embryo berries will have been cut off, but you are at least rewarded by all-year interest. More intricate shapes can be given a light trim every two months or so using 'Topiary and

Trimming Shears' (ex. Burgon & Ball), ideal for young tender growth. If you are looking for an elegant shape there is little to beat a mop-head, a ball on top of a straight naked stem or trunk, either planted in a large terracotta pot or in the ground with a clipped square shape of, say, dwarf box at its base.

Hollies vary enormously in shape and size. If you're looking for a large screening plant, *Ilex x altaclarensis* 'Wilsonii' is a large and vigorous lady with prolific scarlet fruits, and as such makes for an excellent hedging plant. It is the *altaclarensis* species that has less prickly leaves and faster growing than species of *Ilex aquifolium* (common or English holly). I well remember going round the Savill Gardens with John Bond, the then curator, and him telling me that hollies are greedy plants. When you plant them, therefore, give them a large hole generously enriched with well-rotted organic matter to get them off to a good start.

There are plenty of things to be getting on with on milder days in mid-winter. Because plants are now fully dormant this is the time to prune, and I am thinking particularly of climbing vines, all of which are welcome plants in all gardens. Whether you are training a climbing vine up and over a pergola or arch or up a wall, it is important to establish a neat framework of main shoots or 'rods' first. New shoots that have twisted themselves around

canes or wires, and which are destined to become part of the main framework, should be unravelled and tied to their support with, say, 'Flexi-Tie', a soft plastic string that stretches as the stem fattens. This is more expensive than other ties, but it does last for many years, unlike green string for example. All other side shoots should be cut out close to the older wood, just as you would do when pruning wisteria, in order to establish fruiting spurs. Of the fruiting vines a good white variety to try is 'Seyval Blanc', a vigorous grower, prolific fruiter and, perhaps most important of all one of the most disease-resistant varieties of all resulting in the avoidance of having to use a copper-based spray. A popular black grape is 'Triomphe d'Alsace' with all the attributes of 'Seyval Blanc'. All fruiting vines dislike a badly-drained soil, are tolerant of a wide range of pH but must be planted where they get maximum sunlight. All we need to do now is to pray for a sunny summer to come. We deserve it. ■

