

## Grow Your Own Holiday Greenery

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

The Christmas holiday is a time when many, if not most, households bring various forms of natural or faux greenery into the house. These traditions are many and varied and most of them date back centuries in fact millennia to Romans, Pagans and traditions associated with the winter solstice. Regardless of the origin or the reason plants, like many different evergreens for Christmas trees, mistletoe, holly, evergreen boughs for wreaths, garlands and swags, are often evident in many a home. While many of us go out and purchase either the real version or the artificial version, did you know you can actually grow some of this greenery yourself? It'll take a few years to likely get plants big enough to "harvest" greenery, but it could be something fun for not just you but the entire family to do!

First and foremost, I'm going to discourage you from trying to grow your own Christmas tree. It takes at least seven years to get a decent sized Christmas tree and even then we are limited to the evergreen species that many of us like to have for a Christmas tree, and no, Fraser Firs don't grow in Kansas! Then there's the annual shearing of the trees to get that nice shape. No, spend your time focusing on greenery.

Holly is another story though. While holly doesn't like our hot and dry summer winds, it does perform well on the east and north sides of our homes or anyplace that protects the plant from harsh summer heat. What you need to remember with the hollies is that they have separate male and female flowers. You will need one male plant for every five or six female plants if you want to have the red berries. The most common cultivars that you may encounter will have names like Blue Boy/Girl, Blue Prince/Princess or China Boy/Girl. These designations are used to differentiate the male from female cultivars. The males seem to have more cold tolerance than the females and Blue Boy/Girl may be the most cold tolerant. Two or three female plants should provide all the greenery most homes would need. A lesser known holly is called winterberry. It loses its leaves in the fall but has large red berries that stay on the plant. All of the hollies will do better with acidic soils so add lots of organic matter and sulfur at planting to help acidify the soil.

While I would discourage trying to grow your own Christmas tree, you could grow pines to harvest the boughs for garlands or wreaths. While evergreens like spruce and fir are often sold for fresh greenery, I wouldn't recommend trying to grow either one of these. Pines can do okay, especially in the short term. If you plant a species like southwestern white pine you'll get a pine species that is fairly hardy, it has one of the faster growth rates and the foliage is very soft and supple. Most of the other pines tend to be fairly "stickery" and "pokey". As I said above, it'll probably take about five years to get enough growth that you can start harvesting greenery but plant them in a location where you won't be using them for landscape purposes and treat it like a long term crop that you will be harvesting.

Our last holiday plant I'll talk about is mistletoe. Mistletoe is a parasitic plant that grows on trees, usually in the tops of trees. Unfortunately it is a more southern plant. You start to run into it in very southern Kansas and on south. It's hard to "start" mistletoe on a plant and around here it is likely to winterkill anyway. So you'll just have to keep buying your mistletoe from a nursery or use artificial! Regardless, enjoy your holiday greenery!