

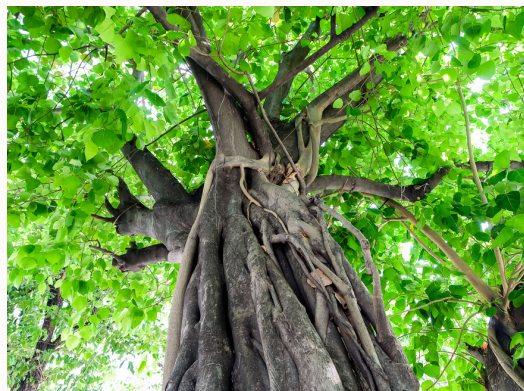
THE OUTSIDER

Illinois Extension Horticulture serving Henry, Mercer, Rock Island, and Stark



HORTICULTURE HOLIDAY

Plants play an important role in our lives in ways we often overlook. Growing plants is an obvious way we enjoy them. Consuming plants is another. And this time of year, many cultural holidays are celebrated with a variety of plants in a variety of ways. Fragrances help link the past to the present. Decorations inspire a mood of joy and fellowship. And some are referenced in nearly mythical tones. Here we explore a bit of the horticultural aspects of some of these plants to more fully appreciate their contributions to our winter holidays.



BODHI FIG TREE

According to Buddhist teaching, on December 8 over 2,500 years ago, Siddharta Gautama sat under a sacred fig tree (*Ficus religiosa*) and obtained enlightenment. This tree is known as the Bodhi Fig Tree and Guatama is known as The Buddha. The original Bodhi Fig tree that shaded The Buddha no longer exists, but descendants of the tree have been cultivated in monasteries from seeds collected while on pilgrimage. In its native range, the tree is a large broadleaf evergreen. It is epiphytic or an air plant, meaning it grows on another plant for physical support. Unlike smaller epiphytic plants, Bodhi Tree will develop dangling roots that anchor into soil. The oldest known Bodhi Tree is in a temple at Anuradhapura, believe to be a cutting from the original Bodhi Tree.

See it at this link: [@www.srimahabodhi.lk/web/about](http://www.srimahabodhi.lk/web/about)

“I like to compare the holiday season with the way a child listens to a favorite story. The pleasure is in the familiar way the story begins, the anticipation of familiar turns it takes, the familiar moments of suspense, and the familiar climax and ending.”

—Fred Rogers



THE GIFT OF THE MAGI

Christians know that on January 6 (the 12th day of Christmas), Jesus was visited by three priests known as the Magi. They each presented him with a gift: Gold, frankincense and myrrh; given as symbols of the life Jesus was to live and the significance He would have in this world and the next. Gold, a mineral, was and is a symbol of wealth and kingship. Frankincense is a fragrance derived from the resin of the *Boswellia* spp. and many believe represents Jesus's divinity, and myrrh is a perfume obtained from *Commiphora myrrha* shrubs and used in the time of Jesus as an antiseptic and embalming fluid. Many see the gift of myrrh as a foretelling of Christ's crucifixion.

Boswellia and *Commiphora* are both in the *Burseraceae* family and are native to areas of Somalia and Ethiopia in East Africa. *Boswellia* is a hardy tree that is adapted to growing along rocky shores of the Arabian Sea.



Boswellia spp. (Frankincense Tree)

The holiday season is a perfect time to reflect on our blessings and seek out ways to make life better for those around us.

- Anonymous



Commiphora myrrha (Myrrh Tree)

Commiphora is a large shrub or small tree, well adapted to grow on shallow soils. This characteristic proves valuable for erosion control. The genus is promiscuous, cross pollinating readily which can make species identification challenging. Many species exhibit this same characteristic. Top of mind are the oaks of Illinois.

To harvest the resin (dried tree sap) from which frankincense and myrrh oils are derived, tree bark is wounded causing sap to ooze from the cut. Sap is allowed to dry on the tree for several months before being collected and used to make frankincense and myrrh extract. This is a time and labor-intensive process. A related process done to Illinois trees for the collection of maple sap for the creation of maple syrup.



Frankincense: dried tree resin

CLOVE

Cloves are the fragrant flower buds of the evergreen tree *Syzygium aromaticum*. Native to the Maluku Islands of Indonesia, clove is a medium sized tree hardy in zones 11 and 12 and preferring well-drained, moist soils. The plant is grown for the unopened flower bud which are harvested and dried to produce the clove. Plants begin to set flowers near the fifth year of growth and can be productive for many decades. Harvest is labor intensive and done by hand when buds are at full size. A full sized bud is between one half to three quarters inch and has four unopened petals in a tight ball.

Clove has been used for centuries as a spice and oil. First recorded as a sort of breath mint during the Han Dynasty in China, the spice gained popularity and economic significance. Wars were fought to have access to native groves and smuggling operations were performed to transport seedling stock to establish production operations elsewhere.

In the modern kitchen, clove is used in many common products including Worcestershire sauce, ketchup, Indian masala chai tea and Chinese five spice mix. A natural air freshener can be created by studding an orange with dried cloves known as a pomander ball.

A pomander is a ball made for perfume. It has been around for centuries and has taken many forms. Pomander balls as we know them today were used in the 18th century to adorn baskets, cupboards and could be taken during travel to mask undesirable smells of the urban environment.



Cinnamomum verum (Cinnamon Tree)

CINNAMON

Cinnamomum verum is a native to the island of Sri Lanka and *Cinnamomum* spp are cultivated in areas around the South China Sea. *Cinnamomum verum* is a broadleaf evergreen that can grow up to 35 feet tall. These tropical plants grow best on well nutrient rich, drained soils. Cinnamon as an herb, is the dried bark from the tree.

Management techniques transform this upright tree into a shrub-like specimen through the act of coppicing. During the second or third year of growth, cultivated trees are cut back to the ground which stimulates auxiliary shoot development. These shoots are allowed to grow for a short while prior to being harvested for their bark. By harvesting a limited number of shoots each year, the root stock continues to produce new shoots for future harvests.





Mistletoe on Scots Pine

MISTELTOE

Perhaps best known for its romantic association, this is a curious tradition considering the plant is hemiparasitic, stealing water and nutrients from its host plant's vascular system through its roots. Mistletoe is an evergreen plant that can conduct some photosynthetic processes by converting sun into sugar.

Species of mistletoe are found worldwide. The North American species are American mistletoe (*Phoradendron leucarpum*) and dwarf mistletoe (*Arceuthobium* spp.). The genus name *Phoradendron* is said to mean "thief of the tree" in Greek. The species common name is equally fitting being derived from "mistel" meaning dung and "tan" meaning twig after an astute observer recognized the plant was an important food source for birds and spread through the natural disposal of the seeds. Neither species is overly particular about the host plant on which they grow.

Most noticeable in the winter months, mistletoe looks like balls of green high up in tree canopies. Unless the tree is already unhealthy, the nutrients and water lost to mistletoe is unlikely to impact overall tree health. In fact, mistletoe can be a valuable source of food and shelter for many wildlife species. A word of caution, the berries are not fit for human or pet consumption so be careful if you are incorporating mistletoe into your holiday decorations.

OUTSIDER ACTION

Check out these DIY projects from IL Extension

- Create your own Wax Amaryllis following these instructions go.illinois.edu/WaxAmaryllis
- Make your own Pomander ball, holiday spice drinks at more at go.illinois.edu/PomanderBalls

AMARYLLIS

Native to tropical areas, *Amaryllis* spp. has been cultivated for nearly a century and has come to be associated with winter holidays. A tender bulb, amaryllis is unique in that it does not require a chilling period, making it particularly prone to bloom during our winter months.



Available in wide variety of colors: from white to pink to red and every variation between, these blossoms are a holiday staple often treated as an annual, but they can be perennial.

Follow these tips to cultivate as a perennial: Once blooms are spent, remove the flower stalk and allow leaves to remain. Continue to water and fertilize throughout the rest of the year. Bulbs can be moved outside during Illinois's growing season. Bulbs need a rest period before blooming again, so bring the bulb inside before the first frost, store in a dark location and halt watering. Remove leaves as they fade. Allow bulbs to rest for eight to twelve weeks before encouraging to re-bloom.

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