

DOWNNS PARK NATURE NOTES

GREENS AND REDS

Many a winter walk, especially after a snowfall, has surely been brightened by American holly (*Ilex opaca*), with its cheerful red berries and leathery green leaves.

The medium-size, slow-growing evergreen thrives in full sun or under taller trees. Its light gray bark is thin and smooth. The wood is light-colored, tough and finely grained, and is used in such things as musical instruments, furniture, carvings and models.



The leaves and berries have been popular as Christmas decorations since the Pilgrims landed in 1620 and discovered the American version of English holly. The tree has long been celebrated in verse and song. As Shakespeare wrote in his poem “Blow, blow, thou Winter Wind”:

*Then heigh ho, the holly!
This life is most jolly.*

Holly isn't the only plant dressed up in green and red this time of year. You'll have to look harder – and a little lower – for partridgeberry, but it grows in small patches throughout the park. The native vine stays close to the ground and has green oval leaves, each of which has a distinctive white stripe. Occasionally, you can spot the red berries. The fruit is not important as wildlife food.



Partridgeberry's scientific name, *Mitchella repens*, honors a Virginian, John Mitchell. A physician and botanist, he is best known for publishing one of the most comprehensive 18th-century maps of North America.

– Dave Cohn, naturalist volunteer