

## Your garden in December - the holly & the ivy

The Holly and the Ivy is a Christmas carol we know so well, but here are a few things about holly and ivy that perhaps are less well known.

Our native holly is at its peak at Christmas with clusters of blood red berries that add festive cheer to wreaths and table decorations. However, if it wasn't for the unusual activities of the mistle thrush, then there would be no holly berries at Christmas at all.

As the berries ripen in late autumn, pairs of mistle thrushes take up residence near the plant, guarding the berries zealously and driving off any other birds that try and eat them. In most winters, the thrushes can keep control of the bushes for a long time. But if times are hard, flocks of hungry



birds eventually overwhelm them and the bush can be stripped of berries overnight. Without the thrushes, the berries would be gone before Christmas, and the carol might never have been written!

As for ivy, this must be the most underrated plant in the garden. People often hate the way it scrambles over fences and trees and along the ground. I think we need to update our view. What other plant will grow in the most inhospitable, dark and dry corner of our garden, providing evergreen interest whilst screening fences, ugly sheds, or covering the ground to smother out weeds?

For wildlife, ivy is invaluable. It provides dense cover and ideal nesting sites for birds. It is an important source of late season nectar for insects, especially butterflies. In winter the berries are a favourite with birds especially blackbirds, thrushes and pigeons.

So as we sit down to our Christmas lunch, let's thank the mistle thrushes for the holly berries, and make a New Year's resolution to appreciate ivy for the versatile super-plant it is!