

Tree of the Month, March 2017: Holm or holly oak (*Quercus ilex*)

Holm oak is a large evergreen tree native to southern Europe and northern Africa. Its serrated, leathery, dark green leaves resemble those of holly, and the species is commonly called holly or holm oak, with *holm* being a Middle English word for “holly”. The specific epithet, *ilex*, is also shared with the holly genus, *Ilex*. It is unclear whether the Latin word *ilex* was originally used to describe holly or holm oak, or both, so it is hard to tell if the holm oak was named for its resemblance to holly or vice versa. Both trees were known to the Romans, so it is possible that they used one word to describe both hollies and holm oaks; after all, this was before the age of modern taxonomy.

Holm oak can reach over 20 metres in height and has finely cracked dark gray bark. Tiny female flowers and long, dangling male catkins appear in April and May, followed in autumn by pointed brown acorns that are edible if properly roasted.

Holm oak is a host tree for the prized black truffle (*Tuber melanosporum*), which forms an ectomycorrhizal association with the tree’s roots, coating them in mycorrhizae that help the tree absorb nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus in exchange for sugars to help feed the fungus. Holm oaks are often used to establish truffle orchards.

At VanDusen, holm oak can be found in the Mediterranean Garden.

