

Dragon Lady Holly

By Molly Gray, Fairfax County Master Gardener
Dragon Lady Holly (*Ilex x aquipernyi*) may be a good landscape choice if you're looking for a tall and skinny evergreen. It grows 10 to 20 feet high and only 4 to 6 feet wide. It's considered hardy to USDA Zones 6 to 8. It's supposed to grow in full sun, but actually prefers some afternoon shade. A Dragon Lady Holly won't be happy in a hot southwest location. It tolerates part shade, but it will grow thinner the shadier it gets. It will need to be pruned to maintain a pyramidal shape, or to keep it from getting too thin and wispy.



Berries

The foliage is relatively small and is very spiny. For this reason it is considered more deer resistant than many other evergreen hollies. It is a cross between English Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) and Perny Holly (*Ilex pernyi*). Unlike most other holly hybrids, there is no specific male pollinator. In other words, there is no such thing as a Dragon Gentleman. Most references recommend an *Ilex merserve* 'Blue Stallion' or 'Blue Prince' as a pollinator. Most references do claim that a Dragon Lady will produce red berries in the Fall if a male pollinator is planted. However, none of the Dragon Ladies I planted six years ago have ever gotten red berries.

In 2012 I planted five of them along a fence line. They were in 15-gallon pots or balled in burlap, so they were about five feet tall. I planted two 'Blue Prince' hollies approximately 150 feet away. They only got about three hours of sun when the surrounding oak trees were fully leafed-out. They would develop lots of green berries, but then they'd all suddenly fall off in the summer. Soil testing indicated no problems with the soil, and close attention ruled out possible drought stress as a cause for the berry drop. I observed the Blue Prince's flowering at the same time as the Dragon Ladies' so I felt they were well-paired. My best guess was that they didn't have enough sun, especially because they had become very wispy.



photo: by author

Growing in Shade

Then I found an opinion published on-line by George Weigel, a certified horticulturist in Pennsylvania, that Dragon Ladies may have a genetic predisposition to drop their fruit. It's believed that they may be able to pollinate enough to develop green berries, but not enough to complete their development. Although I still think mine have too much shade, I also believe that genetics are playing a role in their early berry drop.

If you really want red berries in the Fall, I recommend you skip this holly. But if you need a tall skinny evergreen and can give it 4 to 6 hours of sun, it should do well in our area. It may not keep a perfect pyramidal shape, and may not stay dense unless you are able and willing to prune it, but it may just be the perfect size for your needs.

References

Ilex x aquipernyi "Meschick" *Dragon Lady*, Missouri Botanical Garden, St. Louis, Missouri.

Dragon Lady Holly, University of Maryland Extension, College of Agriculture and Natural Resources

George Weigel, certified horticulturist and author posted August 15, 2015

Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS), Philadelphia, PA