

A Special Garden Celebration

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 3, 2010)

As many of you know, we have a quiet, relaxing and unusual spot of natural solitude and respite in our University of Tennessee Arboretum located just a few minutes south of us. I go there often, as do many of you.

Among the many species of trees, flowers, shrubs and just natural hardwood forest there are several special gardens of various types of special plants, shrubs and trees. One of the most extensive and one with a special history is the Elmore Holly Collection.

Located on a sunlit hilltop selected for its exceptional location for a Holly garden by Richard Evans, then Superintendent of the UT Arboretum and now Director of the UT Forest Resources and Education Center which includes the UT Arboretum, is the superb garden containing a wonderful collection of some 200 handpicked and carefully selected specimens of Hollies. It is well worth the short walk to find it.

The garden consists of Native American Hollies, Chinese and Oriental Hollies, Hybrid Hollies, Tennessee Hollies, and English, European, Western Asian Hollies. Each in their own designated area as laid out based on the original Holly Garden design that was hand-drawn in 1983 by the late Lois Good, landscape designer and past president of the Arboretum Society.

This beautiful spot was designated the "Harold L. Elmore Holly Collection" on April 18, 2004, by the University of Tennessee. The Arboretum Society requested this designation "in recognition of Harold Elmore's volunteer spirit and unselfish contribution to, and support of, the development of this outstanding collection of hollies."

The letter acknowledging this honor also includes an admonition to continue the efforts of Harold Elmore, known to many simply as "Mr. Holly." The charge conveyed in the letter was to perpetuate the legacy through adequate care and maintenance. The beauty of the garden today attests to the fulfillment of this 16 year old commitment.

Harold Elmore's association with the UT Arboretum began on March 15, 1976, when by a letter to Richard Evans, he announced his intention to become a member of the UT Arboretum Society. He conveyed his intent to share his enthusiasm for and fascination with hollies with the Arboretum. And he did just that over the next several years.

He immediately became an active member of the Arboretum Society and so much an integral part of the Arboretum that starting in 1977 he provided holly from his nursery "Holly Haven Hybrids" for the arboretum plant sale. Over the years he expanded his personal collection to over 800 cultivars of many different kinds of holly covering his five-acre farm in West Knox County. Many of these would eventually become part of the present Elmore Holly Collection at the Arboretum.

Harold retired in 1982 from TVA as a Regional Director of Non-Power Projects. He then redoubled his efforts in support of the Arboretum. He served four consecutive terms as president of the society. Under his leadership the society began a speakers' bureau and an annual tours program, both highly successful and popular programs.

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In 1983, he presented a plan for a holly planting in the arboretum and was pleasantly surprised by the enthusiastic response from Richard Evans who proposed the present location instead of the more modest location north of the service road he had suggested. The domed hill just east of the Rhododendron Vale was a choice location and well suited to what Elmore wanted as a "Holly Garden." He described the site as "an ideal site for most holly species."

By 1985, the sunlit garden spot was prepared for planting. The date to begin the first planting was set for January. Then temperatures dropped to -24 degrees! Replanting was quickly rescheduled to April. On that rescheduled planting day 25 hollies were planted by volunteers and the holly garden was a reality.

Since then the annual "Holly Work Day" has seen new hollies planted during winter each year. A maintenance plan has been faithfully followed. Plants in the collection have been fertilized and mulched. The much enjoyed annual work days have become social events with food and hot drinks. For years Harold Elmore was a central figure in these work days and since his death in December, 2002, his memory has served to remind holly enthusiasts of the importance of their work as the Holly Garden expanded and grew.

The collection was mapped and the nomenclature of each plant verified. A Walking Tour Brochure was designed and printed. Plant labels were installed. Plans were initiated for an entryway. And the garden continued to expand annually.

In 1994, Harold Elmore wrote, as a member of the Holly Task Force, the following as part of a mission statement and goals for his beloved holly collection at the arboretum: "...establish and maintain at the UT Arboretum a world-class collection of plants of the genus *Ilex* for the purposes of research, germ plasm storage and development, testing , promotion and distribution of new and improved holly cultivars...add 50 to 100 new holly cultivars per year...encourage horticultural, medicinal and market researchers to utilize the Arboretum holly collection...encourage distribution of superior holly cultivars through plant sales." This mission and these goals are being achieved.

The UT Arboretum has a world class holly garden, thanks to the dedication of many volunteers, but thanks primarily to "Mr. Holly," Harold Elmore. His keen interest in all things "holly" and his dedicated attention to the long range planning necessary to assure the success of such a garden as well as his many personal hours of work and devotion to the Arboretum Society through leading the annual plant sales all contributed to the present successful and beautiful Harold L. Elmore Holly Collection.

On Saturday, July 24, 2010, a dedication ceremony was held at the Harold L. Elmore Holly Collection garden to unveil a lovely "L" shaped rock pillar and low wall (suitable for sitting) entrance feature. This stonework has been a labor of love by volunteers who devoted many work sessions to carefully preparing the site and laying the stones.

The result of their labor is a fitting memorial with three plaques commemorating first the devotion of Harold L. Elmore, second naming the garden and finally official recognition of the garden as an "Official Holly Arboretum" by the Holly Society of America. The entrance stone feature completes a perfect

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setting for the garden.

Harold L. Elmore's love of hollies was a theme running throughout the presentations at the dedication and especially in the history of the UT Arboretum's holly collection presented by Fran Scheidt, a member of the UT Arboretum Society Holly Task Force. But the most insightful observations came from the various members of the Elmore family present at the dedication.

I found the story shared by Harold's son, Tom, to be the most intriguing (remember, I am a historian!). It seems that Harold was a genealogist who, like many, searched his ancestry seeking the "scoundrel" in his line of descent. While he never really found a good candidate for that honor, he did find, according to Tom, an "incompetent guard" who changed the course of history.

Tom said that when John Sevier made his escape from the stockade where the North Carolina legislature had placed him after dissolving the state of Franklin, the shot fired at his retreating backside was only a powder burst as the Elmore ancestor assigned to guard Sevier had improperly loaded the bullet into his weapon and it rolled out the end of the barrel when the guard raised the gun to his shoulder to fire.

Thus, John Sevier lived to become Tennessee's first governor, thanks to the incompetent ancestor of the Elmores. What a great story!

If you have not seen the Harold L. Elmore Holly Collection, make it a point to take the short hike to the top of the hill and experience the beautiful hollies for yourself. Even if you don't know one from the other, as is the case with me, knowing that these plants were carefully selected by "Mr. Holly" will cause you to appreciate them more.

You might even learn to see the difference in the various holly cultivars. At the very least, you will enjoy a nice easy stroll in our most relaxing and quiet wooded retreat, one of our Oak Ridge treasures, the UT Arboretum.



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Richard Evans and Tom Row unveil the stone pillar entrance to the Harold L. Elmore Holly Collection



Susan Elmore Childs and Tom Elmore, children of Harold L. Elmore pose with the prints of the stone pillar entrance given them by the UT Arboretum while standing beside the entrance pillar honoring their father, Harold L. Elmore