

### THE BARE ESSENTIALS ABOUT BERRYING BRANCHES



#### **THE PATIENT** Berrying branches

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#### **THE SYMPTOMS** Berry drop

> The holidays are approaching, the days have shortened and autumn has arrived in all its splendor as fall foliage explodes with color. You can keep up with Mother Nature inside the shop with brilliant golds, yellows, oranges and deep reds provided by berries, branches and pods.

Many berrying branches are perfect for accenting floral displays: bittersweet (*Celastrus*), American beautyberry (*Callicarpia*), St. John's Wort (*Hypericum*), snowberry (*Symphoricarpos*), nandina (*Nandina*), viburnum (*Viburnum*), firethorn (*Pyracantha*), privot (*Ligustrum*) and Ilex species, such as holly and winterberry. Most branches are usually harvested after the fruit has ripened.

Depending on the species, leaves may not be present with the berries. With many species, like American beautyberry, the foliage is removed at harvest because it doesn't last as long as the berries. But since, the dark, green leaves of some hollies are prized, they stay on the branch.

**STOLEN BEAUTY** The fruit of beautyberry falls off quickly, like those on the left, if stored too long or left too thirsty.

#### **Diagnosis**

When berries prematurely drop off the branches, it's more than likely caused by water stress, prolonged storage or improper temperature during transport or storage. Exposure to ethylene causes similar symptoms on sensitive species such as holly.

#### **Preventive Measures**

Always cut the lower two inches of the stem to create a fresh surface that readily absorbs water. We no longer recommend crushing or pulverizing the ends of woody stems, as this can inhibit water uptake and release bacteria into solutions.

Hydrate stems by immediately placing in a clean, freshly made solution. Some researchers have found a significant increase in vase life when stems were maintained in flower food; others found they do just as well in water and yet others have shown that sugar was detrimental to some foliage cuts and turned leaves brown. You can experiment to see what works best.

We recommend using flower food to limit bacteria growth. Woody stems take up water more slowly than herbaceous stems, so keep them hydrating overnight or for 24 hours. Never reuse solutions, no matter how clean they appear. Woody stems are already prone to blockages, as they respond to the wound of the cut by closing it off, so don't risk dirty water making it worse. Avoid getting berries and leaves underwater. Every two days, change the solution every couple of days to reduce the bacteria load and re-cut the stems. The care and handling of berrying branches is similar to that of many cut flowers: Handle branches tenderly. Rough handling causes berries to drop and evergreen holly leaves to crack. Process branches immediately upon arrival.

If immediate processing is impossible, store at the proper temperature required of each species — most fruit-

bearing species prefer between 33 and 35 degrees and humidity levels of about 95 percent to prevent drying. In the cooler, keep branches held dry wrapped in plastic. Some foliage and fruiting stems can be held for weeks or even months, but this depends on the species, as does whether they need to be stored in water. Just keep in mind that prolonged storage can contribute to water stress.

#### **Ask about Ethylene**

Although many berry-bearing stems are not affected by ethylene exposure, leaf and berry drop can occur with sensitive species. Most hollies are so sensitive to ethylene injury that even low concentrations will induce leaf and berry drop. Verify from your supplier before buying that sensitive varieties have been adequately pretreated.

Berrying branches require the same home care as a cut-flower arrangement: supply water to the cut stems and keep in cool room, away from drafts, direct sunlight and direct heat sources. Berries usually last seven to days but some species can last much longer. Treated well, berries make the perfect, colorful houseguest for the holidays. 🌿

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#### **Branch into Books**

Still feel out on a limb? Read more in "Woody Stems for Growers and Florists – How to Produce and Use Branches for Flowers, Fruit and Foliage" by Lane Greer and John Dole available at [www.timberpress.com](http://www.timberpress.com).