



Scientific Name:

Quercus ilex

English:

Holm Oak

Maltese:

il-balluta;
is-siġra tal-ġandar

The Holm Oak is an evergreen tree which is native to the Mediterranean region. It has a rough bark with rigid leaves. To minimise water loss, the latter are covered with a thick waxy cuticle, and are dark green in colour above but whitish below. The leaves vary in shape and size with age and environmental conditions. Those on the lower branches are usually toothed and resemble the leaves of the European holly; such leaves are hard and somewhat spiny, features which tend to discourage grazing animals. Both male and female flowers occur on the same tree; the female flowers becoming acorns on pollination.

It is thought that, in the past, considerable areas of the Maltese Islands were covered by evergreen forests characterised by holm oaks. However, the colonisation of the Islands by man, and the grazing effects of sheep and goats, led to the over-exploitation and the near disappearance of such forests.

Today, only four small forest remnants with very old holm oak trees occur in Malta. In order to ensure their protection and conservation, the species per se is protected under national legislation; meanwhile, habitats characterised by this species are considered of importance under EU legislation. In this regard, a number of sites have been designated to afford protection to this species and related habitats, some of which comprise trees that are at least 1,000 years old.

