



deciduous native Hollies

BY GIL NELSON

Even after shedding their leaves, these hollies shine in the fall and winter garden.

MENTION HOLLIES to most gardeners and they immediately conjure images of shiny, spiny, dark green leaves, a conical form, and bright red fruits glistening in the December sun. There is little doubt that the winter beauty of evergreen hollies strikes a chord with many plant lovers.

But evergreens are not the only hollies worthy of our attention. Deciduous hollies, too, can make dramatic statements in our gardens and landscapes. Unlike some deciduous plants, whose charm diminishes with their falling leaves, deciduous hollies come into their own in fall and winter, their branches festooned with showy fruits that, botanically speaking, are termed

drupes. As with their evergreen cousins, their brightly colored jewelry hangs on well into winter, providing birds and squirrels with a nutritious food source.

There are 11 species of deciduous hollies native to the United States and southeastern Canada. Some, such as winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*), have a very broad range. Others, such as Suwannee River holly (*I. curtissii*), are confined to a very localized habitat. All are dioecious, meaning that some plants are male and others female. To ensure optimal fruit production, gardeners need to plant both male and female selections. (For a brief description of the holly family and its origins, see the web special

linked to the online version of this article at www.ahs.org.)

WINTERBERRY

The most popular and widely grown native holly is winterberry (*I. verticillata*, USDA Hardiness Zones 3–9, AHS Heat Zones 9–1). A wetland species in nature, winterberry is found predominantly along streams and at the edges of bogs, pocosins, floodplains, and swampy woods from Canada to northernmost Florida and west to Louisiana. It is much more common in the northeast than the Deep South and is one of the hardier deciduous hollies. Nevertheless, it readily adapts to garden soils and at least some hardy selections perform

This is the first of a two-part series by Gil Nelson; evergreen native hollies will be featured in the November/December issue.



'Sparkleberry' holly, opposite, livens up the winter landscape with its brilliant red fruits. Winter Red®, above, is a popular winterberry cultivar with large red fruits that persist into late winter. 'Winter Gold', right, was developed from a Winter Red® plant that produced yellow fruits on a few branches.

equally well in more or less dry, sunny sites. I planted the cultivar Winter Red®—a New England favorite—in my drought-stressed, sun-drenched garden in Georgia, where it has fruited prolifically and doubled in size in only two years.

As its name suggests, winterberry's main attraction is its ascending branches bearing bright red fruits that begin to color in early fall, turn bright red by mid-December, and last much of the winter. The deep green leaves are about four inches long and two inches wide with an attractive quilted appearance and sharply toothed margins. In fall, these sometimes take on a burgundy-red cast before dropping. It grows six to 10 feet tall with a similar diameter.

Although species plants of winterberry can be difficult to find, numerous cultivars are available. Winter Red® is one of the best and most widely used. A large, rounded shrub that may take nearly 30 years to reach its maximum size, Winter Red® pro-



duces abundant three-eighth-inch-diameter, intensely red fruits that persist well into February. 'Southern Gentleman' blooms at the same time as Winter Red® and is its best male pollinator.

Other excellent winterberry selections include the red-fruited 'Red Sprite', 'Sunset', and 'Bright Horizon'—all of which have larger fruit than Winter Red®. 'Red Sprite' is more compact than Winter Red®,

with a mature height and width of about four feet. It also blooms slightly earlier, making the early-flowering 'Jim Dandy' a good pollinator. 'Red Sprite' is considered best for USDA Zone 8 and northward, but it performs well for me in my functionally Zone 9 garden. There's also the yellow-fruited 'Winter Gold', which was selected from a single plant of Winter Red® that—through a "sport," or mutation—produced some branches with yellow fruits.

Winterberry also has been crossed with the Japanese species *I. serrata* to produce several large, robust hybrids, including *Ilex* 'Sparkleberry' (Zones 5–9, 9–5). At Callaway Gardens near Pine Mountain, Georgia—which has one of the best holly collections in the country—it is used to stunning effect. "We've had great success with 'Sparkleberry'," says Hank Bruno, director of horticulture at Callaway, "which fruits heavily with 'Apollo' as the pollinator. It dominates the winter landscape and needs some pruning to keep it in bounds." A hybrid bred specifically as a consort for 'Sparkleberry', 'Apollo' grows to 12 feet tall and wide if left unpruned.

POSSUMHAW

Native to moist habitats from the mid-Atlantic west through Indiana to Kansas and south to Texas and the Gulf Coast, possumhaw holly (*I. decidua*, Zones 5–9, 9–1) is another prolifically fruiting species that is widely grown. Like some other deciduous hollies, the leaves of possumhaw are sometimes closely set at the end of short, stubby shoots, which make them appear opposite or whorled. Possumhaw produces flowers and fruits as a suckering shrub, but it will develop into a small tree if left to its own devices. In the

wild, mature plants may reach 30 feet tall with an attractive leaning or arching form. It grows best in moist, organic-rich soil in full sun but will tolerate part shade.

'Warren's Red', an abundantly fruiting female selection with an upright habit, has become the favorite cultivar in southern gardens. Its leaves are slightly wider and darker green than those of the species and turn yellowish before falling.



Selections of possumhaw holly can either be multistemmed, such as ‘Warren’s Red’, left, or develop a single trunk, like ‘Council Fire’, above, usually does.

The leaves often persist into late fall and early winter—to the delight of some gardeners and the dismay of others. Ray Head, president of the Holly Society of America, is decidedly in the latter camp. “I prefer ‘Sentry’ and ‘Pocahontas’ over ‘Warren’s Red’ because they don’t sucker as much and they tend to defoliate earlier for a good display of visible fruit,” says Head. Pollinator species for this and other *I. decidua* cultivars include ‘Red Escort’, as well as the evergreen American holly (*I. opaca*).

As Head suggests, several other red-fruited female selections of *I. decidua*—including ‘Council Fire’, ‘Sentry’, ‘Red Cascade’, and ‘Pocahontas’—are also worthy cultivars. ‘Council Fire’ and ‘Pocahontas’ are dainty trees that mature to about 15 feet tall and usually have a single trunk, erect stature, and a rounded crown similar in form to some hawthorns (*Crataegus* spp.). Both of these selections are northern forms that perform best north of USDA Zone 9. ‘Red Cascade’ is noted for its large fruit and ‘Sentry’ for its narrow, more or less columnar crown. ‘Sentry’ typically loses its leaves early in the season, retains its fruit throughout the winter, and can rival winterberry in fruit display.

Yellow-fruited forms include ‘Byers Golden’, introduced by Byer’s Nursery of

Huntsville, Alabama, and ‘Finch’s Golden’, also discovered in Alabama and named for environmental writer and naturalist Bill Finch. The advantage of yellow-fruited selections is that they tend to hang longer on the hollies, perhaps because they are not as visible to birds.

BEST OF THE REST

Of the other nine native deciduous hollies, only six are available in the trade. For the most part, these species are confined to public gardens and those of avid holly enthusiasts. “We propagate several species of deciduous hollies from seed and cutting, but only on a small scale, because we are not aware of a profitable market,” says Charles Webb of Superior

Trees, a wholesale nursery near Madison, Florida, that has specialized in growing native plants for many years. Based on my own experience, many of these hollies have excellent garden potential and should be more widely used. Superior Trees’ retail partner, Mail Order Natives, and Woodlanders (see “Sources,” far right), offer some of the more difficult-to-find forms.

Suwannee River holly (*I. curtissii*, Zones 7–10, 10–7), native only in a small area of northern Florida, tends to grow naturally in thin, nearly neutral soils over limestone. Some experts believe it to be a variety of *I. decidua*; others feel it constitutes a distinct species. It is distinguished from typical possumhaw by having short-

HOLLY SOCIETY OF AMERICA

Holly fanciers will find lots to learn from the Holly Society of America (HSA). Founded in 1947, HSA serves as the official registration authority for holly cultivars and a resource for both native and non-native hollies. Among the HSA’s activities is an annual meeting, held in the fall to ensure plenty of fruit-laden plants can be seen on the field trips, plant displays, and garden tours. An annual plant auction includes hard-to-find hollies donated by HSA members. The 61st annual meeting will be held October 29 to November 1, 2009, at Vineyard Haven on Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts. The society’s website (www.hollysocam.org) includes helpful listings of arboreta that have holly collections and retail nurseries that specialize in hollies. —G.N.

er, narrower leaves that typically do not exceed two inches long and five-eighth-inch wide. According to Ray Head, Suwannee River holly blooms later than possumhaw, which effectively reduces the likelihood of interspecies cross-pollination.

Swamp or sarvis holly (*I. amelanchier*, Zones 6–9, 10–6) is an upright shrub or very small tree that occurs mostly in standing water along slow-moving streams and in pocosins and wet upland depressions. In the wild it is now confined to scattered populations in the coastal plains of the Carolinas, Georgia, and the Florida panhandle.



Smooth winterberry produces large red fruits that are relished by many kinds of birds.

Swamp holly is one of the few deciduous hollies in the coastal plains that has colorful fall foliage. The leaves turn pale yellow as the season progresses, forming an attractive contrast to the relatively large three-eighth-inch fruits. The fruit color of swamp holly is a dull red rather than the typical lustrous red of most species. Like many wetland plants, swamp holly adapts readily to the garden but will likely require a modicum of moisture for maximum health.

Smooth winterberry (*I. laevigata*, Zones 4–7, 7–4) is a mostly coastal plains species growing naturally in bogs, low woodlands, and acidic swamps. Its foliage is similar to common winterberry, but it produces fewer and more scattered fruits and its leaves often fade to a beautiful pale yellow in autumn. Mountain winterberry

(*I. montana*, Zones 5–7, 7–5) is another potentially tree-sized holly that can reach nearly 40 feet tall. It grows naturally only in the mountains and upper Piedmont of West Virginia, Virginia, the Carolinas, and northern Georgia, where it is common, but it is more difficult to find in nurseries.

The catberry (*I. mucronata*, Zones 3–6, 5–2), or mountain holly as it is sometimes called, is the newest member of the genus *Ilex*. Long classified as *Nemopanthus mucronatus*, it and the closely related long-stalked holly (*I. collina*) are now considered by most taxonomists to be clearly embedded within the

true hollies. Catberry is a cold-hardy, northern species that occurs naturally in boreal bogs, swamps, and on mountain slopes from Ontario and Newfoundland south to Minnesota, Ohio, Indiana, Maryland, and the mountains of West Virginia. The dull red, velvety fruits are borne on relatively long, conspicuous stalks. Unlike other deciduous hollies, catberry fruits appear during summer rather than winter. This species is not widely available, but should definitely be sought out by New England gardeners.

A HOLLY WITH POTENTIAL

As the popularity of deciduous hollies increases, gardeners can expect more species and selections to enter the market. One likely candidate is the sand or Carolina holly (*I. ambigua*, Zones 7–10,

Sources

Arborvillage Farm Nursery, Holt, MO. (816) 264-3911. www.arborvillage llc.com.

Fairweather Gardens, Greenwich, NJ. (856) 451-6261. www.fairweathergardens.com.

Forestfarm, Williams, OR. (541) 846-7269. www.forestfarm.com.

Girard Nurseries, Geneva, OH. (440) 466-2881. www.girardnurseries.com.

Mail Order Natives, Lee, FL. (850) 973-6830. www.mailordernatives.com.

TNZ Nursery, Louisville, KY. (502) 836-6908. www.tnz.us.

Woodlanders, Aiken, SC. (803) 648-7522. www.woodlanders.net.

Resources

Most of the following resources are available from the Holly Society of America (www.hollysocam.org).

Florida's Best Native Landscape Plants by Gil Nelson. University Press of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, 2003.

Hollies: A Gardener's Guide, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, published in cooperation with the Holly Society of America, 1993.

Hollies for Gardeners by Christopher Bailes. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon, 2006.

Hollies for the Landscape in the Southeast by Ken Tilt, David Williams, Willard Witte, and Mary Kathryn Gaylor. Alabama Cooperative Extension Service, Circular ANR-837.

Hollies: The Genus Ilex by Fred C. Galle. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon, 1997.

10–7), which now enjoys only limited availability but is being investigated by breeders. Growing to 20 feet tall, this very attractive shrub or small tree occurs naturally from North Carolina to central Florida and west to eastern Texas. Because it grows predominantly in sandy uplands and dry forests, it has excellent potential for xeric gardening. The leaves usually have bluntly toothed margins but vary widely in size, shape, and color. The shiny red fruits are about three-eighth-inch in diameter.

The inherent variability in this species makes it an excellent subject for experimentation. “Our planting puts on an attractive display of bright red fruit each year and has developed nicely during a several-year drought,” says Charles Webb of Superior Trees. “This holly is obviously well suited for planting on dry sites under shade of pines.”



The fruits of ‘Scarlett O’Hara’ winterberry steal the show in this fall border that includes Joe Pye weed (*Eupatorium* sp.), silver willow (*Salix alba* var. *sericea*), and elephant ear (*Alocasia* sp.).

The knock against *I. ambigua* is that it does not hold its fruit long enough into winter to be successful. It begins coloring earlier than some other species, however, and the fruits are very juicy, making them an excellent food source for birds.

HOLLIES IN THE LANDSCAPE

With the exceptions described above, most of the American deciduous hollies will thrive in a moist but free-draining site that has moderately fertile, slightly acidic, organic rich soil. All will grow best in full sun or part shade.

They are well suited to gardens in much of the eastern United States and southeastern Canada. West of the Rockies, winterberry and possumhaw cultivars and hybrids such as ‘Sparkleberry’ are also adaptable to gardens from the Pacific Northwest down into the coastal ranges of northern and central California (Sunset Zones A2, A3, 1–7).

For optimum pollination, the rule of thumb is to have at least one male plant for every 10 females. In *Native Trees, Shrubs & Vines* (Houghton Mifflin, 2002), author William Cullina recommends planting males within 50 feet of females for best results. To ensure that

you are selecting an appropriate male pollinator—and one whose bloom period will overlap that of the female selections you are planting—Cullina suggests checking with the nursery. Fred Galle’s holly book, listed on page 33, includes a helpful chart of bloom times for deciduous holly selections.

In general, deciduous hollies are most attractive when they are planted in masses to enhance the effect of their fall foliage and winter fruits. They are often used as screens or hedges, or planted along the edge of a woodland to provide food and cover for wildlife. Underplant with spring-blooming bulbs and shade-loving perennials.

To get maximum pleasure from their fall and winter display, plant deciduous hollies against a backdrop of evergreens in a site where they are visible from a window or patio. That way, you can enjoy the beauty of the fruits and the show of birds that will come to feed on them.

Gil Nelson is an author, photographer, and botanist based in Georgia. His next book, The Best Native Plants for Southern Gardens, is scheduled for release by University Press of Florida in 2010.



Although not yet widely available in the trade, sand or Carolina holly has shown potential because of its drought tolerance, attractive foliage, and early fruit display.