

Berry Berry Good

How to make your garden shine with hollies

WRITTEN BY KAREN BUSSOLINI





Red-twigged dogwoods (*Cornus sericea*) and winterberry holly are natural companions in the wild and in a damp spot in garden writer Sydney Eddison's Connecticut yard.



EVERGREEN AND DECIDUOUS NORTH AMERICAN HOLLIES (*Ilex* spp.) that cheer up our winter landscapes with bright berries are versatile landscape plants year-round. Jennifer Pennington, a landscape architect and Communications Coordinator at Bowman's Hill Wildflower Preserve (a Wildflower Center affiliate) in southeastern Pennsylvania points out that they're not only attractive but also a great source of food for the birds.

"Our nursery customers are thinking about the choices they make for wildlife, not just the aesthetics," she said. Berries (especially small ones) on female plants sustain birds and small mammals in winter – but don't try eating them, as they're toxic to humans. Small greenish-white flowers are nothing to write home about – unless you're a bee or other pollinating insect, for which they are of special value. Some butterflies are holly specialists. Evergreen hollies provide protection from predators and winter weather, while twiggy deciduous species offer good nesting sites.

Most hollies can be treated as either shrubs or small trees, although American holly (*I. opaca*) can rise to a magnificent 60 feet in warmer parts of its range. Hollies prefer acidic soil, but yaupon (*I. vomitoria*) and possumhaw (*I. decidua*) tolerate more alkalinity. Hardiness, growth rate and tolerance to drought or flooding likewise vary, both between and within species.

The South and Southeast are rich with hollies, some specialized, others far-ranging. (Florida is home to 11 species; the West has no natives). When Birmingham, Alabama-based garden writer Linda Askey wanted to screen a property line along a forested creek, she sought an understory tree adapted to shade, shallow-rooted red maples, seasonal flooding and drought. Sarvis holly (*I. amelancharia*), native to woodland creeks, cypress swamps and coastal plains in portions of only 7 states, was just the ticket. It was available to her because of specialty growers who propagate local genotypes and get them into garden centers. The mainstays in the nursery trade, though, are from species with larger ranges, including many garden-worthy cultivars selected

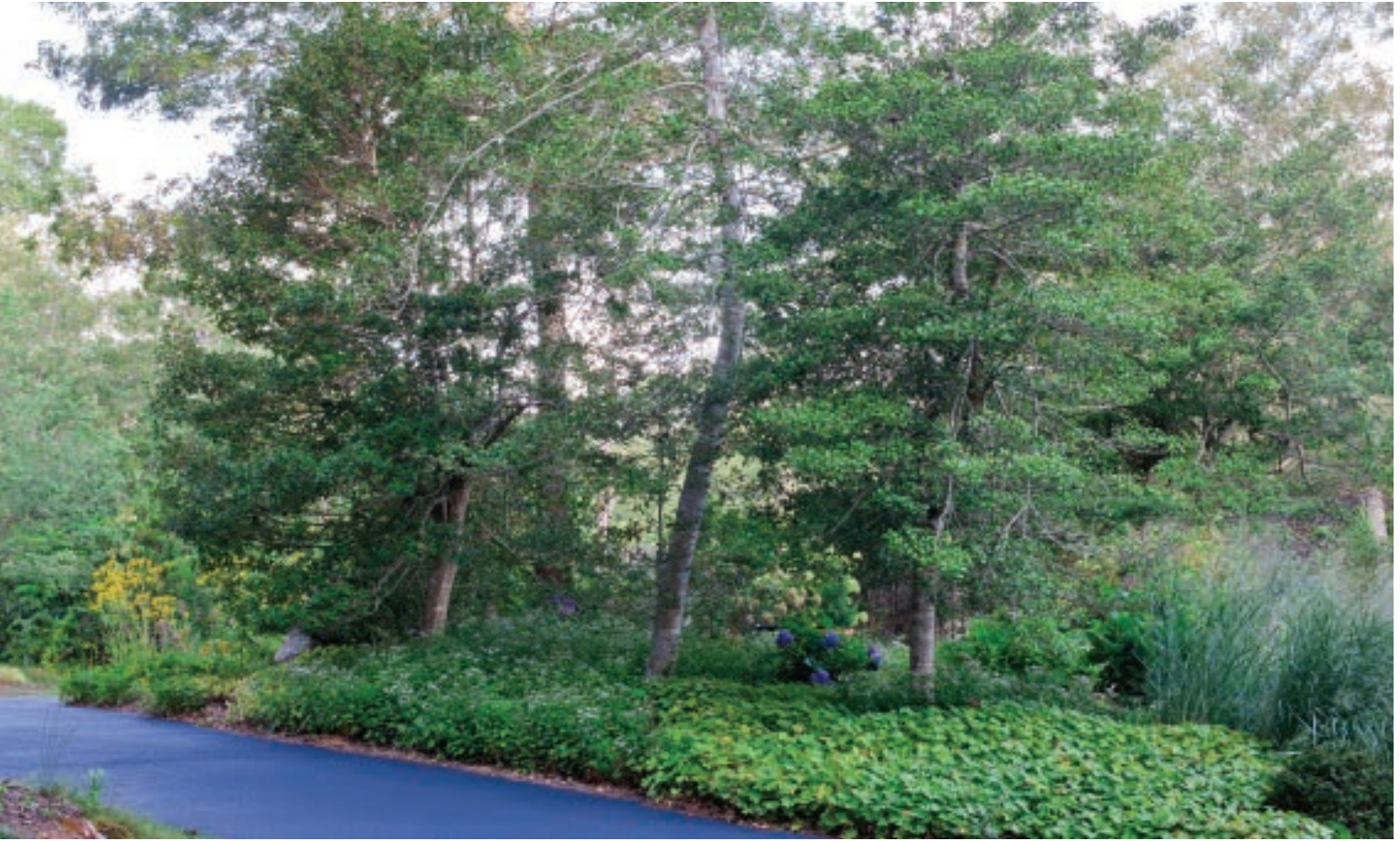
for special qualities – plant size and habit, leaf characteristics, berry or leaf color, fruit size and yield, and hardiness.

EVERGREEN HOLLIES

American holly is the classic red-berried Christmas holly, with 2- to 4-inch dull-green leathery leaves armed with spiny marginal teeth. A pyramidal specimen tree or dense screen in the open, in the understory it's charmingly irregular, often multi-stemmed. Slow-growing and long-lived, American holly takes dry or wet (not saturated) soil, salt, air pollution, sun, shade, heat and cold. With a range extending from coastal Massachusetts south to Texas and Missouri, it's no wonder that holly enthusiasts have discovered and propagated seedlings with many variations, sold under descriptive names like 'Maryland Dwarf' (good for hedging) and 'Old Heavy Berry.' Deer tend to avoid its prickly alkaloid-filled leaves. In northern climes, emulate their piney woods habitat and protect them from desiccating winter winds. Michael Nadeau of Wholistic Land Care Consulting in Connecticut values them as one of the few broadleaf evergreens that will grow in the same shady conditions that hemlocks – widely devastated by woolly adelgids and browsing deer – prefer.

Yaupon (*I. vomitoria*) doesn't make you vomit, as the name suggests. In fact, its young toasted leaves make a tasty caffeinated tea. This Southerner has a friendlier and smaller-scaled presence in the garden, with its delicate filigree of branches and diminutive gently scalloped leaves. Translucent red berries persist long into winter. Wild yaupon forms dense shrubby thickets in the Southeast. In tended landscapes and dry climates it's well behaved, valued for drought and humidity-tolerance, and available in shrub, upright tree, weeping and dwarf forms. Andrea DeLong-Amaya, the Wildflower Center's Director of Horticulture, recommends yaupon as an evergreen that is easy to grow, disease-resistant and low-maintenance. "You can shear it tight for a formal look or be more free-form. Use dwarf yaupon anywhere you'd use boxwood, which is subject to disease and

ACROSS TOP: Self-sown evergreen Christmas hollies (*Ilex opaca*) are graceful and irregular in the understory of oak forests as far north as eastern Massachusetts. Garden radio host and author C.L. Fornari allows them pride of place at the top of her Cape Cod driveway. **ACROSS BOTTOM LEFT:** A large specimen Inkberry (*Ilex glabra*) softens the look of a formal stone house and fits in with existing plantings in a landscape that transitions from clipped boxwood to all native. **ACROSS BOTTOM RIGHT:** An orange-red berried possumhaw (*Ilex decidua*), rescued from a construction site, thrives in a semi-shady border in an Austin, Texas garden. The homeowner limbed it up to highlight lovely silvery trunks and allow for light and views.





Jennifer Myers planted a formal *alée* of upright 'Will Fleming' yaupon hollies to create a grand entrance to the old German stone farmhouse she and her husband restored in Austin's Shoal Creek neighborhood.



needs more water. The upright forms are really beautiful if you limb them up and make a multi-stemmed little tree to reveal the branching structure and silvery bark.” It’s not a good choice for pure caliche; DeLong-Amaya suggests a deep organic garden soil, especially in full sun, and notes that they’re happy in clay even with a high pH.

Inkberry (*I. glabra*) is a suckering small-leaved shrub inhabiting bogs and wet woods from Nova Scotia to Texas. Carol Capobianco, Director of The Native Plant Center in Valhalla, New York, which was the first Wildflower Center affiliate, encourages use of this underappreciated beauty. “Inkberry provides structure and four-season interest in native gardens. It is also an excellent hedge or screen – use it instead of invasive border privet or the ubiquitous boxwood. Inkberry can be pruned, and though it has a looser, natural habit, it can have an air of formality. Best of all, its purple-black berries (females only) provide a food source for the birds.” Michael Nadeau points out common mistakes in how they’re used. “They’re facultative wetland plants, so they want moist to wet soils. They will grow pretty well in drier conditions but lose their lower leaves. And if you try to shear it like boxwood, you will wind up with a very spindly plant.” He recommends reaching into the plant with hand pruners and cutting back to a lateral branch to reduce height, then shearing lightly, by hand, on the outside and laying off the fertilizer. “It’s too much input. If soil is halfway decent, most plants get all the nutrients they need. It’s not like growing corn where you’re trying to maximize yield; you just want green, sturdy, good-looking plants.”

DECIDUOUS HOLLIES

Possumhaw (*I. decidua*), a wide-ranging Southerner with silvery bark and a horizontally branched structure, along with winterberry (*I. verticillata*), the hardiest holly, frequenting acidic wet soils from east Texas and Florida to Nova Scotia, are the Cinderellas of the family. They’re plain green in summer, but, “because possumhaws drop their leaves in winter,” Andrea DeLong-Amaya says, “they’re more dramatic, the fruits stand out more. And late in winter, big waves of cedar waxwings go berserk flying from tree to tree stripping off all the berries; it’s quite a spectacle.” Jennifer Pennington suggests placing winterberries along pathways or outside windows for winter enjoyment and finds robins on their return migration similarly entertaining. Alas, this writer’s robins strip her big old winterberries before heading south. New England deer have developed a taste for the shrub too. Michael Nadeau’s solution: Surround them with inkberries, which take to similar conditions and deer don’t touch. ❁

Karen Bussolini is a garden photographer, writer, speaker and eco-friendly garden coach who grew up beside a swamp full of winterberries.

The Sex Life of Hollies: It Takes Two to Tango

HOLLIES ARE DIOECIOUS, which means that berry-producing female flowers and male flowers required for pollination are borne on separate plants. Bees can fly several miles for a good pollen source, but if wildlings aren’t within a quarter mile or so (or if deer nip them in the bud), for a reliable crop of berries, plant a male “consort.” ‘Jim Dandy’ is a dwarf (so it doesn’t take up much room) male winterberry that pollinates early-blooming female clones such as ‘Red Sprite’; ‘Southern Gentleman’ pollinates late bloomers. ‘Red Escort’ possumhaw pollinates ‘Warren’s Red’ females. ‘Will Fleming’ yaupon, a dramatic vertical accent in the garden, and ‘Stoke’s Dwarf’ are male cultivars. ‘Jersey Knight’ is an *I. opaca* male. Experts usually recommend one male for every five females. As berries begin forming, provide water to help them set well.

In the wild, American holly readily crosses with dahoon (*I. cassine*), a small evergreen tree with glossy oval leaves. These naturally occurring hybrids are designated *Ilex x attenuata* and include many popular garden selections, such as ‘Savannah,’ a sparsely spined selection discovered there in 1953; ‘East Palatka,’ propagated from a plant growing near that Florida town; and ‘Longwood Gold,’ introduced by Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania.

So with all this diversity, why do vegetatively propagated cultivars dominate the market? People want nice berries on their hollies, i.e., females. When a seedling with outstanding berries, form or unusual leaf is discovered, it can be endlessly propagated. Bob Mahler, Bowman Hill’s nursery manager, explains that most holly seeds take two seasons to germinate (double dormancy) and may not bloom for eight years, so it can take 10 years to know whether you have a male or female – a big investment of time, space and money, with uncertain outcome.

Nursery catalog descriptions are less-than-complete in their description of winterberry cultivars in particular, so buyer beware. Plants sold as *Ilex verticillata* ‘Apollo,’ ‘Autumn Glow,’ ‘Bonfire,’ ‘Harvest Red,’ ‘Raritan Chief’ and ‘Sparkleberry’ are crosses with *Ilex serrata*, a Japanese species. Bob Mahler cautions that they could mix pollen with native populations and should be avoided.