

Pause for Plants, Yuletide.

“Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly,” describes a Yuletide tradition that dates back to early Christian history, with some Roman ties. The name holly is derived from Anglo-Saxon “Holegn” their name for the tree used in winter to decorate homes. There are at least 400 species of holly worldwide, and roughly 20 are native to North America. American Holly, *Ilex opaca*, which is Delaware's state tree, is also native to other eastern states, and as far west as Texas. It is usually found in woods as an understory species. It has the typical “Christmas tree” shape when it grows naturally, unencumbered and left untrimmed. This growth shape is due to what is called apical dominance, where the main stem grows more strongly than the side stems. American Hollies can grow to 30 or more feet.



Left: A very nice mature “Christmas tree-shaped” specimen on Main Street Due West, SC.

Right: Prickly leaves and fruit. They are called berries, though botanically speaking they are drupes!

Most hollies have prickly leaves, and most are evergreen. A notable non-evergreen holly is Winterberry, *Ilex verticillata*. Healthy specimens can grow to 15 feet and usually produce a profusion bright red berries that make a real show.



Winterberry in fruit at Missouri Botanical Garden.

Another native holly is Yaupon Holly, of upland forests as well as the scrub and coastal regions of the southeast, and extending west to Oklahoma. It's really a very nice plant with a rather unsavory scientific name, *Ilex vomitoria*! The species name refers the way your body protectively reacts to ingestion of yaupon holly's toxic red berries. They are also toxic to dogs. Yet, yaupon is an important wildlife food plant, and many birds and wild mammals eat these berries without experiencing toxicity!

It's also noteworthy that berries of most hollies contain toxins. South Carolina colonists were glad to learn how to make yaupon holly **leaf** tea from Native Americans. Yaupon is the only native holly that produces caffeine. Young leaves are picked, dried until they turn black, and then brewed to a tasty non-toxic tea. Indians called it "Black drink," and they used it for ceremonial purging by over imbibing!



Images from Yaupon holly growing along Depot Street, Erskine College, Due West, SC.

Left: Yaupon Holly with fruit. Yaupons can also grow to 25 feet, but tend to have a more rounded shape. Right: Yaupon leaves and fruit. Compared to American Holly, leaves of Yaupons are not prickly, just smaller gently scalloped.

Horticulturists have developed some really attractive yaupon varieties used for landscaping throughout the southeast and southwest and on into California. Particularly popular is the Weeping Yaupon, *Ilex vomitoria* 'pendula'.



A weeping Yaupon with berries on the Erskine College campus, Due West, SC.

To plant and have holly for holiday decorating, you'll have to be sure to buy a female, and a male. Hollies are dioecious, from Greek, di = two, oikos = house. Male plants produce flowers with pollen, and female plants produce flowers with ovaries and eggs. Flowers bloom mostly between April and July. Having male and females planted in close proximity assures a good supply of berries, the fruits that develop from ovaries. Though we call the fruits "berries," botanically these fruits are called **drupes**! Enjoy your hollies!

