

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



*In the afternoon light winterberry can be very dramatic.
Photo: J. Morton Galetto.*

What's in a Name?

Common Winterberry, with its bright red fruit, is a Jersey woodland showstopper, autumn through winter.

By J. Morton Galetto

Common winterberry is a real show-stealer in fall and winter. We find it naturally growing in the woods of New Jersey and as well as in people's yards. Because of its popularity as a landscape plant a number of cultivars have been propagated. There are two winterberry species in New Jersey – Common winterberry holly – *ilex verticillata*

(L.) A. Gray, and smooth winterberry – *ilex laevigata* (Pursh) A. Gray.

Common names for *ilex verticillata* include black alder, coralberry, Michigan holly, winterberry holly, Canada holly, and fever bush. The latter comes from Native American medicinal use.

Common winterberry, as its name suggests, is easily seen throughout New Jersey in wetlands and along waterways. Smooth winterberry is a smaller shrub with a more scattered occurrence in the same kind of habitat; it differs in that the underside of its leaves are only hairy on the veins, and the flower sepals are different. Smooth winterberry's range is confined to the coastal plain states, whereas common winterberry's range extends from the Atlantic coast to both sides of the Mississippi drainage, south to Texas, and northward to the eastern half of Canada.

Our discussion will be confined to *ilex verticillate*, or common winterberry. But let's first establish that winterberry is in the genus *ilex*. The three common hollies in N.J. are inkberry (*ilex glabra*, not *phytolacca americana*/pokeweed), American, and winterberry. The popularity of the latter two species has led to the development of many cultivars; the University of Minnesota

Extension service listed ten female varieties of cultivars and three male for winterberry.

However, naturally selected or native species have stood the test of time, thriving for thousands of years in New Jersey, so they should prove heartier. Therefore if you are planning on adding this perennial to your landscape a native species would be a better choice. They thrive best in shade and with moisture.



Abundant berries make winterberry very showy. Photo: J. Morton Galetto

The U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service reports that 48 North American species of birds make use of common winterberry's offerings. Local naturalist Pat Sutton reports that over seven species of New Jersey birds use smooth winterberry as well. Some birds mentioned repeatedly as winterberry consumers are robins and cedar waxwings. In the spring, pollinators use its flowers.



*Blossoms on winterberry are generally in June and July.
Photo: Matthew Beziat, Maryland Biodiversity Website.*

Whitetail deer and rabbits will eat portions of the plant but it is not a preference. Rutgers Agricultural Experiment Station suggests that winterberry is seldom severely damaged by deer. Although a number of animals can eat the fruit, the berries are poisonous to

humans, potentially causing low blood pressure and nausea.

The plant is a larval host for the butterfly Henry's elfin and the Harris' three-spot moth. Butterfly and moth expert David Wagner describes the Harris' tree-spot caterpillar as a "strange animal." It looks like a bird dropping, not that unusual in the caterpillar world, and it has markings that make it appear repulsively gooey. Wagner adds that in-person (well, "in-caterpillar") it resembles an orb-weaver spider. It actually rocks side to side so rapidly that its appearance looks blurry.

All ilex plants are dioecious, meaning that female and male are separate plants. Both have tiny white flowers but only the female will produce berries. Most plant species are monoecious, meaning their flowers have both male and female structures. So if you want to ensure a plant has berries you need to get a bush that is mature enough to display fruit – a female. You could also use a cutting from a female plant and propagate it. Or you could plant multiples hoping to get some females. In order to produce fruit a male must be also planted within 40 feet of a female for pollination; one male plant can produce enough pollen for six or more female plants.

Leaves will drop from the shrub and berries will remain on the naked stems; these can be red, yellow, or orange in color.



In winter the berries remain on winterberry even after the leaves have fallen. Photo: J. Morton Galetto.

Each fruit has three to five small nutlets or seeds. The leaves, arranged alternately along the stem, are oval-shaped and pointed, narrower where the leaf meets the stem. This perennial shrub generally grows five to fifteen feet tall.

Its roots spread out producing additional stems. It can be propagated by rooted stem

divisions or from young cuttings. As already mentioned this is another way to insure the plant's sex. If you plant seeds they must be ripe, separated from the fruit, cold, moist, and stratification must be employed. Basically that means that seeds must be treated in conditions that resemble nature's rigor and soil in order to germinate.

Ethnobotany refers to the use of plants by native people for food, medicine, clothing, shelter, and more. Although the plant is poisonous to people, it has been used by native Americans as medicine. Remember that many modern-day medicines are poisonous when not properly administered.

Tribal Iroquois used a decoction of bark as a laxative, and they also used it to induce vomiting, generally to expel another harmful substance. Furthermore if people were afflicted with madness it might be given as an emetic as well. Winterberry was also considered a remedy for gastric distress caused by a liver or gall bladder condition, and it was utilized to retain manly vigor. Ojibwa tribal members employed the bark to cure diarrhea.

Although wetlands may be a preference for winterberry it is tough, also growing in sandy soils and grasslands. It flourishes in a wide variety of climates and can tolerate dry

conditions. We have one area of winterberry in our yard where it has formed a thicket of many stems. Wetter conditions are said to contribute to more stems, and drier to a tighter shrub.

If you haven't added a winterberry to your landscape and you have the proper conditions for it I would strongly encourage considering it.



Sources

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