
Wildflower Spot – December 2019
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

WINTERBERRY

Ilex verticillata

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Truly a spectacular sight in winter – long whips of red berries against a white background, or any place where a spot of bright red is welcome. This holly loses its leaves in late fall and until eaten by songbirds, the glossy red berries are a standout in the winter landscape. The display of berries remains from September to mid-winter, since birds do not eat them until they have softened.

Winterberry is a small to large multi-stemmed shrub which can grow to 15 feet tall, but in cultivation it grows slowly, usually maturing



at 8' tall x 8' wide. Tiny white flowers appear April through May, hidden among dark green leaves with coarse teeth. In nearly every county of Virginia, Winterberry grows in swamps, bogs, and moist forests. Its range extends from Nova Scotia, south to Florida and west to Missouri.

Copying its preferred location in nature, this shrub prefers moist, well-drained habitat, full sun to part shade, and acidic soils. In wet sites, Winterberry will spread to form a thicket; in drier soil it grows in clumps. One male plant should be planted in close proximity to 3 to 5 female plants to ensure good pollination and subsequent fruit set.

In the wild this plant spreads by seeds or suckers but in cultivation it grows slowly, acquiring an upright oval or spreading rounded appearance. Winterberry works well planted in masses, along water or as a shrub border, particularly where the fruit display in fall and winter can be appreciated. The berry-laden stems can be cut for long-lasting indoor arrangements in winter.

“Ilex” is the Latin name for an evergreen oak, noting the fact that most hollies are broadleaf evergreen. The species name “verticillata” refers to the flowers and fruits which are arranged in a whorl around the stems.

Many cultivars are available in nurseries, the most common being ‘Red Sprite’, also known as ‘Nana’ or ‘Compacta’. The berries of all cultivars are enhanced, in color and profusion. ❖

Photo: Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.