

AMERICAN HOLLY

Ilex opaca Ait.

plant symbol = ILOP

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Uses

The attractive evergreen foliage and bright red fruit of this small tree make it a very popular for landscaping. The same attributes that allow this tree to be a desirable ornamental make it one of the most sought after greens for Christmas decoration. The firm bright red berries are consumed by white-tail deer and 18 species of birds. The dense foliage also provides cover and nesting habitat for various songbirds.

Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

Description

American holly normally grows to heights of 15 to 30 feet tall, but records indicate mature heights of up to 100 feet. On the poor soils of coastal beaches, this holly may never exceed shrub size. The bark of it is smooth, and grayish to grayish-brown. The dense branches of this holly grow nearly horizontal in a spreading crown, which takes on a pyramidal silhouette.

The evergreen foliage is stiff and leathery in texture, with large, remotely spined teeth. The leaves are arranged alternately. They are 2 to 4 inches long, satin green and smooth above, and yellowish-green below.

Small, axillary, greenish-white flowers bloom from April to June. Like most others in the holly genus, American holly is dioecious. Pistillate flowers emerge in small clusters from one plant, while staminate flower clusters develop on another. Newly established plants will not flower for 4 to 7 years; prior to flowering there is no practical means of determining the gender of a plant. Bright red, rarely orange or yellow, globular fruit mature from September to October, but may be retained on the plant into the following spring. The berry-like fruit is about 1/3 inch in diameter, and contains 4 to 9 small nutlets. There are an average of 28,430 seeds per pound.

Adaptation and Distribution

American holly grows from Massachusetts to Florida, west to Texas and Missouri, and is adapted to a wide range of site conditions. It grows best on well drained, sandy soils, but will tolerate those which are somewhat poorly drained. This small tree has good shade tolerance, but does well in direct sun. Although this species is often found growing on coastal sand dunes, it is not very salt spray tolerant.

For a current distribution map, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Website.

Establishment

Utilize standard tree and shrub planting procedures to establish containerized or balled and burlapped plants. Bare rooted transplants usually have marginal success.

When establishing American holly, it is important to plant males as well as females if berry production is desired. In a nursery situation the gender ratio should be 1:10, males to females. Establish American holly only where surrounding vegetation or physical barriers protect the plants from harsh winds. Holly plants prefer partial shade, with some full sun exposure during the day.

Cultivars, Improved, and Selected Materials (and area of origin)

There are many ornamental varieties, available from commercial nurseries, selected for berry and leaf color. There are also commercial sources of locally and regionally collected material available from native plant nurseries.

Prepared By & Species Coordinator:
USDA NRCS Plant Materials Program

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For more information about this and other plants, please contact your local NRCS field office or Conservation District, and visit the PLANTS <<http://plants.usda.gov>> and Plant Materials Program Web sites <<http://Plant-Materials.nrcs.usda.gov>>.

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