

Ilex opaca  
American Holly

Tried and True  
Native Plant Selections  
for the Mid-Atlantic

In the 1930s, Delaware surpassed all states in producing decorations made of American Holly, which flourished in its countryside and became its State Tree in 1939. Today commercial demand for holly has declined, but its value in the landscape has not. As temperatures drop, its evergreen leaves and red, berry-like fruits brighten the winter scenery. Common in the Coastal Plain and southeastern Pennsylvania, its frequency lessens moving through the Piedmont into the mountains of Maryland and Virginia.



Tree	Fall Tree, Flowers, Foliage and Fruit
Height: 15–40 feet	
Spread: 10–20 feet	
Bloom Color: Greenish white	
Characteristics	
Slow-growing, upright, pyramidal, <a href="#">evergreen</a> tree	
<a href="#">Dioecious</a> : separate male and female plants	
<a href="#">Alternate</a> , <a href="#">pinnately-veined</a> , thick, dull green leaves with spiny marginal teeth and apical <a href="#">spine</a>	
Inconspicuous greenish white flowers in May	
Brilliant red berry-like <a href="#">drupes</a> October to winter; separate male plant needed for females to bear <a href="#">fruit</a>	
Smooth or warty gray <a href="#">bark</a> ; <a href="#">lichens</a> often present	
Attributes	
Tolerates <a href="#">clay</a> soil and shade; dislikes winter wind; susceptible to insect (e.g., scale) and leaf problems; <a href="#">deer</a> rarely damage	
Winter interest; used for holiday decorations	
<a href="#">Ethnobotanic</a> uses; drupes may be harmful if eaten	
Attracts at least 18 bird species and deer to fruit; provides cover and nesting sites for some birds	
Growing and Maintenance Tips	Excellent Replacement for
<a href="#">Soil Requirements</a> : Average, well-drained	x <i>Cupressocyparis leylandii</i> - Leyland Cypress
<a href="#">Light Requirements</a> : Sun, Partial Shade	<i>Ilex aquifolium</i> - English Holly
<a href="#">Water Requirements</a> : Moist	<i>Ilex cornuta</i> - Chinese Holly
Plant 1 male for every 3 females (of same species with same bloom time) within 200 feet of each other	
Use as specimen or tall hedge	
<a href="#">Hardiness</a> : USDA Zones 5–9	
developed by Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia, serving Arlington and Alexandria	

Images by Elaine Mills (tree) and Mary Free (fruit), Sunny Garden and by Tyler Ormsby (flowers), Arlington, VA