

Ilex verticillata - Winterberry or Michigan Holly (*Aquifoliaceae*)

Ilex verticillata is one of the best deciduous shrubs for ornamental red winter fruits. Winterberry Holly is native to (and thriving in) wet sites containing organic soils with an acidic pH.

Form



FEATURES

- medium-sized ornamental shrub
- slowly maturing at about 8' tall x 8' wide under urban conditions, but larger in the wild
- upright oval to spreading rounded growth habit
- slow growth rate

Culture

- full sun to partial shade
- best performance occurs in full sun in acidic, organically-enriched, moist to wet soils, but it is somewhat adaptable to soils that are occasionally dry;
- chlorosis and stunting will occur in alkaline pH soils
- cultivars are propagated by rooted stem cuttings, while the species forms in the wild spread by seeds or suckers
- Holly Family, with occasional leaf spot being the only minor disease, and wildlife feeding (especially birds and deers) on the ripened fruits as the only pests
- commonly available in container or B&B form
- plant one male plant (of the appropriate flowering time) in close proximity to 3-5 female plants, to ensure good pollination and subsequent fruit set

Foliage

- shiny dark green, deciduous, alternate, elliptical, and serrated
- a distinctive reticulate branching pattern of the veins occurs, with the outermost "shell" of veins being connected in an irregular oval shape, parallel to and very close to the serrated leaf margin
- autumn color is green, yellowish green, or purplish, and ornamentally ineffective



Flowers

- creamy-white and small, dioecious, occurring in early to mid-June in the leaf axils from the new season's growth, and while noticeable up-close, they are ornamentally insignificant
- like Blue Hollies, Winterberry male plants need to be carefully matched with female plants; in many cases, the male plant is simply labelled "early" or "late" in reference to its relative bloom time

Fruits

- green ellipsoid immature berries emerge on female shrubs in early summer, being sessile on the stems, becoming rounded, and maturing to attractive red

berries in late Aug. to early Sept., forming an outstanding contrast in late summer and early autumn against the dark green foliage

- berries persist well into winter (if not eaten by wildlife) and are very showy due to their red coloration on the bare stems, although they will darken in color as the winter progresses

Twigs

- purplish-brown on young stems in winter, becoming gray with age
- plants will become leggy, but at the same time will sucker from their surrounding roots, forming broad colonies, especially if sited in permanently moist to wet soils in a group or mass planting

Trunk

- not applicable

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Function

- most effectively used in a group or mass planting, found at entranceways, along borders, as a deciduous screen, in wet naturalized areas, and excellent at the very edge of bodies of water

Texture

- medium-fine texture in foliage and when bare
- open density in foliage and when bare

Assets

- showy red berries from summer through winter
- wet site tolerant

Liabilities

- female shrubs (which bear fruit) require male pollinators in spring
- require acidic soil for healthy growth and flower/fruit production
- slow growth rate
- root suckering with maturity, forming colonies (this is an asset in naturalized sites, or where erosion control is desired)

Habitat

- Zones 3 to 9, in watershed areas or with roots submerged in bodies of water
- Native to Eastern North America

SELECTIONS

Alternates

- deciduous shrubs with prominent winter appeal (*Cornus sericea*, *Corylus avellana* 'Contorta', *Kerria japonica*, *Myrica pensylvanica*, etc.)

Cultivars – Variants – Related species

- many female cultivars exist; some are hybrids of *Ilex serrata* (Finetooth Holly) and *Ilex verticillata*; their required male pollinators are noted for their early (E), middle (M), late (L), or very late (LL) season of bloom, with the best pollinator(s) in bold:

-*Ilex verticillata* 'Red Sprite' (also known as 'Nana' or 'Compacta') - very large, bright red fruits are borne in profusion and are very winter persistent on this compact cultivar, to 4' x 4' (**E, M**)

-*Ilex verticillata* 'Shaver' - very large, bright red-orange fruits are more flattened than other cultivars, borne in profusion and very winter persistent, to 6' x 6' (**E, M, or L**)

-*Ilex serrata* x *Ilex verticillata* 'Sparkleberry' - bright red fruits are borne in profusion and are very winter persistent, to 12' x 10', but not fruiting heavily when very young (**M, L, or LL**)

