

HAPPY HOLIDAYS!

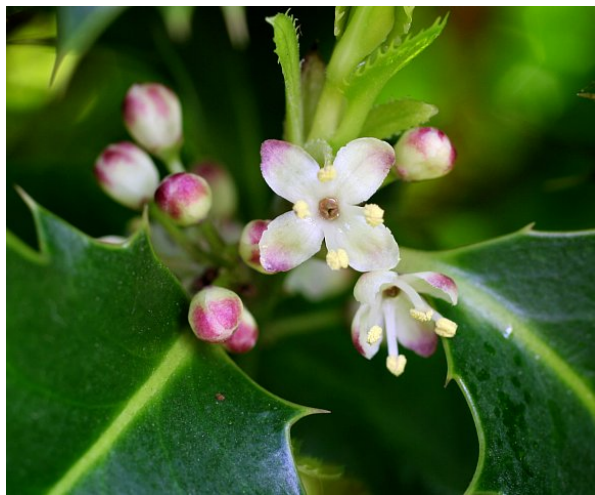
Horticulture Hints

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Can you believe that 2023 is almost over? Already? Where...? (Never mind)

Moving on, this time of year, traditional colors of red and green are seen everywhere. I really love this time of year, and I think the lights are my favorite thing. But speaking botanically, holly is one of the nicest things because of the classic colorings. I thought that we would explore more about hollies because of this lovely winter color combination this month.

Firstly, all hollies are dioecious, meaning that there are both male and female trees. Only the female produces red berries, and for this reason, most nurseries propagate mostly



Male holly flower with pollen

females. Small white flowers are produced in the spring, with bees being the most common pollinator. The bees carry pollen from 1 1/2 to 2 miles away, therefore it's not necessary to have male and female side by side. The berries form through the summer, ripening to red in late fall, providing food for birds throughout the rest of the cooler weather. All these hollies are also evergreen.

American holly (*Ilex opaca*) is the one that is usually thought of at this time of year, with its shiny, spiny leaves and abundant red berries. Boughs of this holly were very popular in Victorian times to decorate the interior of homes. Once cut from the tree and brought inside, they last for a very long time without any attention. And believe it or not, American holly is native from coastal Massachusetts to central Florida, and west to Missouri and eastern Texas. As with all hollies, there are a many varieties available, from dwarf shrubs to medium sized trees.

There are three other native hollies here in central Florida and throughout the south: yaupon (*Ilex vomitoria*), dahoon (*Ilex cassine*), and a hybrid called 'East Palatka' (*Ilex x attenuata*). The latter is a natural hybridization of the American and dahoon that was first discovered in 1927 near East Palatka, Florida.

The yaupon holly is commonly seen in our area, often used in urban settings because of its ability to thrive without attention. It also



Yaupon holly

seems to have the most varieties, from dwarf shrub to full sized weeping trees. The basic variety grows 15 to 20 feet tall with a similar spread. It takes 10 years to achieve the vase shape that this species is known for. Leaves are small, serrated, and dark green. Berries can be red, orange, or even yellow. The fast growth rate and small leaves make it a great choice for topiaries and bonsai. Yaupon leaves are also known for their caffeine content, and in years past, this 'black drink' was used when coffee was unavailable.

Dahoon holly makes a lovely specimen tree, growing to 40 feet with an 8 to 12 foot



Dahoon holly

spread. The dark green leaves are 2 to 3 inches long (the largest leaves of all these hollies), smooth, supple, shiny, with a few serrations near the tip, and a large number of berries.

The East Palatka holly has small, dull green, rounded leaves with a spine at the tip. It maintains a tight, pyramidal shape, which is very desirable as a landscape tree. Classed

as a medium sized tree, it grows from 30 to 45 feet tall.

As with all newly planted shrubs and trees, a consistent source of moisture is necessary to establish a healthy root system. This can take anywhere from 3 to 6 months, depending on what time of year you plant. And don't amend the soil for native trees (especially), or you may end up with an unnaturally narrow root zone, leaving it susceptible to wind and water damage.

This picture of my 'dwarf' holly (I'm unsure of variety) shows just how many berries can form on an ignored shrub, which, by the way, the pair now cover half of the front of my house.



My 'dwarf' holly

I hope you all have a wonderful holiday season, and may your New Year be the best it can possibly be! And, as always, happy gardening!