

## American Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*)

**American Winterberry** is a holly prized for its splash of bright color from densely packed, red berries loaded on slender twigs. When contrasted against white snow on a sunny day, it is one of the prettiest shrubs in winter.

Winterberry is native to eastern North America from Newfoundland west to Minnesota and south to Alabama. Therefore, it has acquired several common names including Black Alder, Inkberry, Possumhaw, Swamp Holly, and....Michigan Holly!

Like most hollies, Winterberries are dioecious, meaning that it has separate male and female plants. Only fertilized flowers on the female plants produce the attractive red berries (actually drupes, 6–8 mm in size). The plant blooms in early June. The flowers are small, 5 mm diameter, with 5-8 cream white petals and are not especially showy. The male flowers grow in clusters, while the female flowers grow solitary or in 2's or 3's. The male flowers are loaded with yellow anthers (pollen-bearing structures), while the female flowers have a distinct green miniature "knob" in the center (immature ovule).

The plant itself is a multi-stemmed shrub, 6' to 10' tall, which tends to sucker and form large oval clumps. In the summer, the dark green leaves are alternate, 1.5" to 3" long, elliptical with an acute apex and serrate leaf margins. The leaves can vary from flat to shiny on the upper surface. Of the 400 species of hollies in the world, only about 30 are deciduous --and Winterberry is one of them, losing its leaves in the fall.

In the wild, Winterberry often occurs in low woods and along ponds and streams, but is also found on dry dunes and grassland. In wet sites, it will spread to form a dense thicket, while in dry soil it remains a tight shrub. In summer, Winterberry provides nesting and cover for wildlife and nectar for insects. In winter, the fruit are an important food resource for many bird species.

Winterberry seeds possess a dormancy period making germination tricky. An easier way to propagate the plant is to root early summer cuttings. Otherwise, this plant is easy to grow with few diseases or pests. Although acidic soils are optimal, the Winterberry will grow well in the average soil in full to part sun. Generally one male Winterberry is sufficient to pollinate 9-10 female plants. When using the branches covered with berries in floral arrangements, use dry (don't put in water) and they will keep for months indoors.

Warning: All hollies can be somewhat toxic if ingested. Small children are most vulnerable because of their small size and curiosity.

More information and photos available at:

[http://hcs.osu.edu/hcs/tmi/plantlist/il\\_llata.html](http://hcs.osu.edu/hcs/tmi/plantlist/il_llata.html)

[http://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id\\_plant=ILVE](http://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=ILVE)

[http://www.abnativeplants.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=plants.plantdetail&plant\\_id=40](http://www.abnativeplants.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=plants.plantdetail&plant_id=40)