
Wildflower Spot – January 2013
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

AMERICAN HOLLY

Ilex opaca

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Almost everybody is familiar with the American Holly, also known as the Christmas holly. Although American Holly is a common understory tree in the Virginia coastal plain today, it was not among the species mentioned by Captain John Smith. Perhaps it had become temporarily uncommon due to the forest burning practices of the Native Americans. This holly has long been one of the most popular trees in the eastern United States, its foliage and berries being used for Christmas decorations and for ornamental plantings.

The flowers of the American holly are functionally only either male or female and a given individual tree bears only one type of flower; thus the presence of trees of both types is required if the trees with female flowers are to produce berries. The small white and very fragrant flowers appear in late spring and the berries that form on the trees with female flowers mature in the fall and persist into winter. Mature trees may grow from a single trunk or be multi-stemmed. The bark is smooth and light gray.



American Holly survives on a wide variety of soils, but growth is best on moist, slightly acid, well-drained ground such as upland pine sites and well-drained bottomland. It is known to tolerate air pollution. Although reported to be toxic to some animals, the fruits are eaten by numerous songbirds, bobwhite, and wild turkey. ❖

Photo: American Holly (*Ilex opaca*) taken by Helen Hamilton
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