
Wildflower Spot – January 2017
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

YAUPON HOLLY

Ilex vomitoria

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

This native evergreen shrub or small tree may be oval to rounded in shape and single-stemmed or clump-forming. Yaupon can form dense screens of foliage and the female plant produces outstanding berries. The leaves are small, dark green and glossy with wavy edges. The fine-textured foliage makes it a perfect screen or tall hedge to contrast with bold plants.

From late summer through winter the graceful branches are lined with copious scarlet berries. Plant the female in a sunny location for good fruit production; the male trees can go in dark spots where you need foliage to fill in blank spaces. While male and female plants are needed for fruit set, this species is cross-fertile with other hollies. An excellent hedge plant, Yaupon Holly can be trimmed to produce a thick screen. Nurseries offer dwarf cultivars which do not require much pruning.

Cold-tolerant, yaupon is widely tolerant of soil types and moisture levels, as well as salt

and pollution. This holly grows in any soil, and likes full sun or partial shade. From coastal Virginia west to Missouri, south to Florida and Texas, yaupon grows in low woodland edges, fields and marshy spots.

The Native Americans brewed a strong “black drink,” used in ceremonies to cause vomiting or to act as a purgative. The leaves were probably those of Yaupon Holly, and the species name refers to this quality of the leaves and fruits. The dried leaves have the highest caffeine content of any North American plant.

Seeds are eaten by cedar waxwing, mockingbird and other songbirds after several freeze-thaw cycles. ❖



Photo: Yaupon Holly (*Ilex vomitoria*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.