

1-1-1995

American Holly, Christmas Holly *Ilex opaca* Ait.

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Recommended Citation

Silberhorn, G. (1995) American Holly, Christmas Holly *Ilex opaca* Ait.. Wetland Flora Technical Reports, Wetlands Program, Virginia Institute of Marine Science. Virginia Institute of Marine Science, College of William and Mary. <http://publish.wm.edu/reports/480>

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Technical Report



Wetland Flora

No. 95-1 / January 1995

Gene Silberhorn

American Holly Christmas Holly

Ilex opaca Ait.

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Ilex opaca can be a small or medium sized tree depending on habitat circumstances. Holly trees often occur as understory trees in forest communities that have been harvested several times in the last 200 years or more. In mature, open canopied forests or isolated situations, American holly may attain heights over 60 feet. This species is one of the most universally recognized trees in the east. The alternate, dark green, leathery, evergreen leaves with pointed margins are very distinctive. Other diagnostic characteristics are smooth to warty light-grey bark and, of course, the red fruits (drupes) found on female trees. Minute whitish-yellow flowers appear in the spring, often hidden with the foliage so they are not readily noticed. The wood is close-grained, hard and ivory in color. This tree is also commonly known as Christmas holly.

Distribution

While *Ilex opaca* is mainly a southeastern species, it does extend north to the coastal areas of New York and southern New England. On Sandy Hook, New Jersey and the barrier islands of Long Island, American holly occurs as a maritime forest community component.

Habitat

American holly often occurs as an understory tree in the coastal plain of Virginia. It may be found in both upland and wetland forests. In the Tidewater area of the Commonwealth, *I. opaca* is typically common as a understory tree in temporarily flooded forested wet-

lands. Common overstory trees in these "winter wet woods" are red maple, *Acer rubrum*, (Wetland Flora, no. 91 -7, July, 1991); sweet gum, *Liquidambar styraciflua*, (Wetland Flora, no. 92 - 1, January, 1991); green ash, *Fraxinus pensylvanica*; and loblolly pine, *Pinus taeda*, (Wetland Flora, no. 93 -3, March, 1993). *Ilex opaca* is similar to paw paw, *Asimina triloba*, (Wetland Flora, no. 93 - 12, November, 1993) in that both woody species are adapted to wetland and upland situations in coastal Virginia.

American holly can also be found as an associated tree in maritime forests along the Mid-Atlantic Coast. It is a common tree in the undisturbed maritime forests of Sandy Hook, New Jersey and the "Sunken Forest" on Fire Island, New York. The thick leathery leaves are resistant to salt spray.

Ecological Values / Benefits

Holly fruits are primary food for numerous species of songbirds, quail and wild turkey. This species is distributed to various habitats via bird droppings. The evergreen canopy affords cover for birds year around.

Hydrophytic Factor / Wetland Indicator Status

According to the *National List of Plant Species that Occur in Wetlands: Virginia (1988)*, *Ilex opaca* is classified as a **facultative upland plant** (FACU). FACUs are plants that usually occur in nonwetlands (estimated probability 67%-99%), but are occasionally found in wetlands (estimated probability 1%-33%).

Ilex opaca Ait.



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*This report was funded by the Wetlands Program
of the Virginia Institute of Marine Science.*

Dr. Carl Hershner, Program Director

*Illustration by
Karen Podd*

*Printed on
recycled paper.* 