

## November Plant of the Month

*Ilex laevigata* and *Ilex verticillata*,

### The Winterberries



As the growing season comes to a close for 2011, some plants will continue to provide botanists pleasure into the winter months, providing a 4<sup>th</sup> botanical season. To highlight what NJ four seasons has to offer, we have chosen the winterberries as November's **Plant of the Month**. Two species are highlighted this month because there are subtle anatomical differences between the two plants, but otherwise they look and act the same whether it's the habitat, habit or ecology.

*Ilex verticillata* is the more common species of the two winterberries. It can be distinguished from its kin by a wooly calyx (white tomentose). This distinction is visible on the spring flowers or fall fruits. Sometimes *Ilex verticillata* has slightly darker and more crinkled (reticulate) leaves and more fire engine red berries, but this is not always the case. *Ilex laevigata* (photo above) has a smooth or pebbled (papilose) calyx without hair and often with more light green leaves.

Both species are wetland shrubs reach heights up to 4 meters yet most plants form wide clumps. *Ilex laevigata* is listed by USFWS as an obligate species (OBL), whereas *I. verticillata* have the less water dependent designation FACW+. In reality, they both are found from the limits of hydric soil influences down gradient into standing water.

Red berries ripening in the fall are natural foods for migrating and wintering birds. These two are often frequented by thrushes, robins, catbirds and other fruit eating species characteristic of NJ's wetlands. It is also an influential landscape plant, with numerous selections created to meet height and berry density considerations.