

December 2013 Plant of the Month



American Holly

Ilex opaca Ait.

December's Plant of the Month identifies a plant we all associate with the winter months and the upcoming holiday season. American holly is a native tree associated with the Coastal Plain yet is found scattered throughout the Piedmont as well. For most New Jersey botanists, it is best known from the Inner Coastal Plain, the Coastal Strip east of Route 9 and the Delaware Bay forests.

Ilex opaca has been used for thousands of years for a number of practical uses. Initially Native Americans used the plant for medicine (eyes, itching), dyes, tool handles, spoons and other home-oriented uses. Europeans discovered its uses and put the tree to use for cart axils, metal tool handles and other places wood would be used that needs a tough grain. As a decoration it has been used since the earliest colonial days. It was a symbol of hospitality, generosity and as a protection the red and green is often associated with Christmas yet the use predates Christianity when the European Celtic tribes used the plant to symbolize life even during the winter. The red symbolized human fertility.

Today, in the wild the tree is often considered a nuisance by modern foresters. The tree does not achieve canopy status for decades, many times succumbing to some physical damage long before reaching the sun. It is often prescribed to be removed during normal forest activities.

There is one place in New Jersey where the trees have been left to their own measures. The trees must be hundreds of years old. A 50-75' canopy dominated by old American hollies exists in Cumberland County, at the southern end of the north south access trail into Bear Swamp West. This forest has specimens that defy identification but for falling leaves!