

SHOWY AND COLORFUL: Native winterberry holly has brilliant red berries on females of the species.

Winterberry is hardiest holly

Though we all know the spiny evergreen leaf of our American holly, few could identify our native winterberry holly, *Ilex verticillata*, in leaf or bud, because it loses its foliage in the autumn. Yet, along many New England back roads are found splashes of brilliant red produced by the profusion of red berries on females of this species, which is common to moist woodlands and swamps in the northeast.

Winterberry holly is the hardiest of all hollies, growing into USDA zone 3 (-30 to -40 degrees winter minimum). Evergreen hollies are seldom found north of zone 6 (0 to -10 degrees) because their evergreen foliage suffers from winter's frigid winds.

A multi-stemmed shrub reaching 10 to 12 feet tall by 10 feet wide, winterberry is suitable for shrub borders, massing and stream bank naturalization. Brilliant red berries up to 1/2 inch across are borne close to the stem, ripening in September and reaching their greatest show after the leaves drop in October. Depending on the appetites of

STRESS-PROOF PLANTS

By Brian Maynard

foraging birds, berries can be found into January. Winterberry leaves are unremarkable— it is the fruit that makes this plant a must in any winter landscape,

Winterberry is virtually free of pest and disease problems and thrives in moist areas with up to several inches of water. However, it also tolerates hot, dry conditions and a range of soils.

The selection of winterberry cultivars has centered upon its fruit. The best-known introduction, "Sparkleberry" sports a wealth of glossy red, medium-sized berries. "Nana" and "Red Sprite" are compact selections that grow to only 3 or 4 feet in height. "Chrysocarpa" is a yellow-fruited form.

University of Rhode Island researchers are working with a Newport nursery to evaluate a

promising selection, known for now as "No. 2," that boasts glossy dark green leaves and good fruit production.

Winterberry roots readily from cuttings taken almost any time of year, treated with low-moderate strength rooting hormone and stuck in a peat-perlite mix for six to eight weeks. For best rooting, strip the fruit when making cuttings.

Hollies come in either female or male plants, and both are required for good fruiting. Our woods are so full of male winterberry that planting a male pollinator may be unnecessary; but just in case, leave room for one male plant within 100 feet of your valued female specimens.

The common cultivar "Sparkleberry" yields the best fruit when "Apollo," a male, is planted nearby.

Brian Maynard is an assistant professor of plant sciences at the University of Rhode Island. This series on stress-tolerant trees and shrubs is a project of the Rhode Island Nurserymen's Association.