

Inkberry Holly, a Native Evergreen

By Susan Camp

Have you been searching for a hardy, low-growing, broadleaf evergreen that isn't fussy about soil and light conditions and will resist deer? Haven't we all been searching for that elusive shrub at one time or another? I may have found one, and it is a native shrub, which adds to its desirability.

There is one boring area around the base of a tall tree near our detached garage that needs something leafy and green to soften the harsh appearance of the gravel parking area. We planted daylilies, but insufficient sunlight prevented them from blooming. We then planted mid-sized hostas, which looked beautiful until the deer discovered them and munched them to the ground in one night. I admit, I should have known better than to plant hostas where deer can get at them, but at that time, the critters had not ventured so close to one of our buildings.

Over the last year, we have researched several evergreen shrubs, most of them Asian natives. Many require full sun and are not deer resistant. One potential shrub was Yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*) a broadleaf evergreen shrub or small tree that is native to coastal areas of the southeastern United States. Yaupon holly prefers sandy, well-drained soil with a pH range of 3.7 to 6.8. It thrives in partial shade to full sun, but is adaptable to a variety of environmental conditions and tolerates heat, wind, and salt spray. Some cultivars of Yaupon holly can grow to a height of 20 feet, but smaller, more compact cultivars are available, including 'Schilling's Dwarf' / 'Stokes Dwarf,' a smaller, mounded cultivar that reaches 3 to 4 feet in height. We had planted several 'Stokes Dwarf' Yaupons in our front garden and decided to look for a different shrub to brighten up the forlorn spot by the garage.

A search for American holly (*Ilex opaca*) a few weeks ago led me to another native: inkberry or gallberry (*Ilex glabra*), and I can't imagine why I never considered it before. Inkberry is a coastal native from Nova Scotia to Florida and Louisiana. It grows in USDA Hardiness Zones 4 to 9, and is usually found in the edges of bogs and swamps or in sandy woodlands.

Inkberry grows to 6 to 8 feet with a spread of 8 to 10 feet, but several dwarf cultivars are on the market, including 'Shamrock' with deep green leaves and a convenient height of 2 to 4 feet. Other small, mounded cultivars are 'Nova Scotia,' 'Compacta,' and 'Nordic.' The full-sized inkberries tend to lose their leaves near the base, but the rounded dwarf cultivars don't become leggy and require minimal pruning in the spring.

Inkberry grow easily in average, medium to wet soils, but will adapt to almost any soil conditions, as long as the soil is acidic with a pH of 4.5 to 6. It grows in full sun to part shade and will tolerate drought, salt exposure, and flooding. Inkberry also tolerates deer and rabbits.

Inkberry, like other hollies, is a dioecious plant. Male and female inkberries develop inconspicuous flowers in the spring. Female inkberries require a male pollinator in order to produce the pea-sized black drupes that songbirds and small mammals consume in winter. (A drupe is any thin-skinned fleshy fruit that contains a single stone, like a cherry or an olive.) All of the available dwarf cultivars are female; there is no male inkberry cultivar at this time. According to the University of Maryland Extension publication “About Inkberry Holly,” some female cultivar flowers may self-fertilize and some may be pollinated by male plants of other *Ilex* species, notably *Ilex crenata* (Japanese holly).

Gallberry honey is prized and locally produced in some regions of the Southeast, and Native Americans brewed a tea-like drink from the dried and roasted leaves.

See the Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder entry *Ilex Glabra* ‘Shamrock’ and the University of Arkansas Plant of the Week entry “Inkberry Holly” for more detailed information.

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