

## Winterberry for Winter Beauty

by Pat Lust, Extension Master Gardener Volunteer

Winterberry or Common Winterberry (*Ilex verticillate*) grows in eastern US from Canada to Florida. Unlike more familiar members of the holly family, it is not an evergreen. Its leaves turn an interesting maroon in autumn before falling off to reveal the beauty of the bright red berries that will punctuate the dreary winter landscape with a spectacular show.

While it is slow growing, winterberry often produces suckers and forms large thickets or colonies, becoming a desirable nesting spot for small wildlife. The inconspicuous greenish-white flowers that appear in June and July provide nectar for a variety of butterflies and bees, and the berries that take center stage in winter provide a feast for a variety of birds. But do not eat the berries yourself. They may be somewhat toxic to humans.

The woody, medium sized shrub (3-12') is dioecious, meaning that each bush has either male or female flowers but not both. If you can purchase them knowing their sex, buy several females along with one male for the most berries.

You can plant winterberry just about anywhere. It grows in wet or dry soil, full sun to part shade, and it requires little maintenance. It is tolerant of stresses like



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erosion, air pollution, wet feet in locations that flood in the spring, dry summer heat and clay soil.

Winterberry can make a good hedge or a special accent in your rain garden. You may occasionally notice leaf spot or powdery mildew, but it is generally free of any serious insect or disease problems.

Many folks like to cut winterberry branches to use as holiday decorations. If you do, perhaps you will return the dried branches to a location where the birds can still feast on their berries.

For Additional Information:

Rhode Island Wild Plant Society -

<https://riwps.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Ilex-verticillata.pdf>

Lady Bird Johnson Wild Live Center -

[https://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id\\_plant=ILVE](https://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=ILVE)