

# WINTERBERRY

BY TERRY BONACE, ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION GROUP

Most people know holly as a prickly-leaved evergreen with red berries. This is most likely American holly (*Ilex opaca*), often used for Christmas decorations. Though native to the United States, it is uncommon in our region. There is also English holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), but it is not hardy here and as the name suggests, comes from Europe. English holly might be found in florist shops or other places selling decorative foliage and can be recognized by its very shiny leaves.



English holly



Winterberry

We have a native holly growing commonly in Beverly Shores that is arguably a prettier plant than both prickly species.

Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*), also called Michigan holly or northern holly, grows along the edges and in shallow parts of our wetlands. This time of year, it starts to stand out along Beverly Drive. As leaves begin to fall from neighboring plants, the bright red berries clustered tightly on long stems become more conspicuous. Unlike English and American holly, winterberry is deciduous and loses its leaves in the winter. But it makes up for this with the abundance of red fruit. In addition, these red berries can persist along the stem all winter long, providing beautiful winter interest. Birds also rely upon the berries for emergency food when winter conditions are harsh, so they have the added benefit of feeding wildlife.

Winterberry does best where soil is moist and acidic, a common soil condition in Beverly Shores, but it tolerates dryer soils when planted. It also needs ample sunlight, something that can be harder to come by. Most cultivars grow to a height of three to five feet. A complicated part of growing winterberry is the fact that it has male and female plants. Of course, only the female plants produce the beautiful berries. There are many cultivars of winterberry available with a variety of attractive features, like greater numbers of berries, but all require the two sexes of plants. *Caveat emptor*-let the buyer beware. Not every nursery or vendor will identify the sex of the plant for you. So, either you must search for such a vendor, or be prepared for planting a large number of shrubs to assure the presence of male and female plants. At least one winterberry variety, called “Royal Family,” has some male branches grafted on a female plant, allowing a single plant to produce ample berries.

If you come across winterberry in Beverly Shores, please resist the urge to gather some for winter decorations. Leave the berries for the birds and allow the plant to spread.

If you have questions about winterberry or other native or non-native plants, don't hesitate to contact Terry Bonace ([tbonace@gmail.com](mailto:tbonace@gmail.com)) or Candice Smith ([Candicepetersonsmith@gmail.com](mailto:Candicepetersonsmith@gmail.com)), for assistance. Also please visit our website at [www.bsereg.org](http://www.bsereg.org) for further information on invasive plants and native replacements.

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