

## COMMON WINTERBERRY

*Ilex verticillata* (L.) Gray  
Plant Symbol = ILVE

Contributed by: USDA NRCS Plant Materials  
Program



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**Warning: Although this shrub species is a good provider of wildlife food, its fruits are poisonous to humans.**

### Uses

The attractive bright red fruit of winterberry is eaten by small mammals and more than 48 species of birds. The leaves and stems of winterberry are not a preferred source of browse, but moose, whitetail deer, cottontail rabbits, and snowshoe hare do utilize this plant. The persistent bright red fruit of this shrub make it very popular for landscaping. It is recommended for planting in shady moist areas, even though its growth and form are best under open grown conditions.

### Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

### Description

Winterberry is an erect moderate sized shrub, growing to heights of 5 to 15 feet tall. The smooth bark of winterberry is gray to blackish, with knobby lenticels. The dense branches of this shrub grow in a zigzag pattern with an upright spreading crown. The twigs are slender, with gray to gray-brown color and small buds.

The simple, smooth, obovate to oblong-ovate foliage is sharply double toothed, with medium fine texture. The deciduous leaves are arranged alternately along the stems. Each leaf is 1 1/2 to 4 inches long, with dark green summer color turning yellow in fall, then drop off by mid-October.

Small, inconspicuous, axillary, greenish to yellowish-white flowers bloom from April to July, after leaves have emerged. Like most others in the holly genus, winterberry is dioecious. Three years after planting, pistillate flowers begin to emerge in small clusters plants and staminate flowers develop on male plants with up to twelve flowers in a cluster; only now can plant gender be determined. Scarlet red to orange, globular fruit mature by late summer, often remaining on the plant into mid-winter. The berry-like fruit is about 1/4 inch in diameter, occurring singly or in pairs, each containing 3 to 5 small nutlets. There are an average of 92,000 seeds per pound.

### Adaptation and Distribution

Winterberry is found throughout the eastern United States. For a current distribution map, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Website.

### Establishment

Planting units of winterberry are propagated by seed, rooted stem divisions, and stem cuttings alike. The germination is usually hindered by hard seed coats and embryo dormancy. Utilizing proper after ripening and cold moist stratification procedures, germination can be stimulated. Seed should be covered with at least 1/8 to 1/2 inch of soil on nursery beds. Fall seedlings should be mulched for winter protection.

When seedlings are acquired, the sex of the plant is typically indeterminable, in contrast to those propagated vegetatively. In late fall root suckers can be directly dug and transplanted, while actively

growing softwood cuttings are taken from late spring to mid-summer. The cuttings are first placed under glass or plastic, but once roots form and begin to grow, they can be transplanted into containers or nursery beds for further development.

Utilize standard tree and shrub planting procedures to plant bare rooted transplants, containerized, or balled and burlapped stock.

### **Management**

It is important to plant both male and females within 40 feet of one another for adequate pollination. For wildlife plantings, it is advantageous to plant higher numbers of females. Weed control by mowing or chemical application is necessary to keep competing vegetation from over-topping winterberries.

### **Cultivars, Improved, and Selected Materials (and area of origin)**

There are a number of ornamental varieties, selected for berry and leaf color, available from commercial nurseries. Local and regionally collected materials are available from native plant nurseries.

### **Prepared By & Species Coordinator:**

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For more information about this and other plants, please contact your local NRCS field office or Conservation District, and visit the PLANTS Web site <<http://plants.usda.gov>> or the Plant Materials Program Web site <<http://Plant-Materials.nrcs.usda.gov>>

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