

American Holly:

an Overlooked National Treasure



The U.S. National Arboretum has one of the largest and oldest assemblages of cultivars of American holly (*Ilex opaca*) you'll find anywhere today. Although it is a common component of untended areas and older-home landscapes, many people might not realize that the majority of hollies sold in nurseries today are of Eurasian descent or, at best, are hybrids with some American holly parentage. In spite of its numerous named cultivars, American holly is relatively undeveloped as a landscape ornamental. Variations from one form to the next are often subtle, especially when compared with Eurasian cultivars. It has even been said that there are simply too many cultivars of American holly; few, if any, are commercially important. However, *I. opaca* does have some very attractive and unusual forms, and the many subtly varied cultivars exist for a good reason, as I'll explain later. Even an ordinary American holly almost always makes a beautiful, tough, and useful plant under extremely trying conditions while asking very little in return.

Although it is often overlooked, *I. opaca* makes an uncommonly noble specimen with the scale and poise to fit naturally even with the sort of monumental neoclassical architecture that abounds in Washington, DC. Its ability to age gracefully and maintain its dense, elegantly layered boughs with little or no pruning sets it apart from many nonnative evergreen hollies and their hybrids, which have outer branches that tend to droop over time and lose their leaves except near the branch ends. Its attractive, naturally cone-like habit and branching structure probably evolved in part to help it resist breakage from heavy snow and ice.

American hollies need not be the exclusive domain of grand, well-tended plantings; established plants will endure extremes of heat and drought, shade and sun, heavy pruning, and even deicing salt. Not far from my home is a beautifully solid, lollipop-shaped specimen growing in a punishing strip of parched ground between a neglected sidewalk and a busy highway, directly under a low-hanging power line in blazing sun, with only trampled weed grasses for company. I can't imagine a more perfect, problem-free tree for that spot, although the plant is so beautiful that it seems a little out of place. The number of individual hollies that appear as gumdrops and assorted other shapes in front of homes throughout the Washington, DC, area illustrate its tolerance to regular clipping.

Although the American holly is distinctly unfashionable today, and the average sapling you might find growing spontaneously along the roadway isn't likely to inspire a new cultivar name, such plants (or rather, the seeds they germinated from) may literally have fallen from the "ugly tree." There was a time not so long ago when the species was considered to be in serious decline, with the choicest specimens being poached during the late 19th and early 20th centuries to satisfy appetites for living holiday decorations. Thanks mostly to the efforts of a few individuals who tirelessly sought out and preserved the most attractive trees they could find by propagating and naming them, we still have a sampling of the cream of the crop secured in a few older botanical garden collections. Selections were made primarily for foliage color, shape, and gloss, for fruit size, color, and abundance, and for plant habit.

In the end, though, the American holly probably owed its salvation as a species to technological and cultural shifts rather than to the rescue efforts: the advent of cheap, mass-produced, reusable holiday decorations probably led to a drop in demand for fresh, wild-cut holly, but not before many of the best clones were lost forever. We should be grateful for the many beautiful selections that were made during this period. By maintaining these cultivars in the Arboretum and elsewhere, we can help preserve the genetic potential of this wonderful species for future American landscapes, when the American holly finds itself in the limelight once more. 🌿

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ONE OF THE INDIVIDUALS WHO WORKED TO PRESERVE THE AMERICAN HOLLY WAS ELIZABETH WHITE OF WHITESBOG, NEW JERSEY.

Although her association with *Ilex opaca* may not be well known to average Americans, she (along with Frederick Coville, first acting Director of the U.S. National Arboretum) is credited with the domestication of the highbush blueberry. Incidentally, she is also indirectly responsible for the first USNA plant introduction to have been bred and selected entirely at the Arboretum itself, *Clethra alnifolia*, 'Pinkspire'; one of its parents was a pink-flowered selection called 'Darlington' that she discovered near her home in the Jersey Pine Barrens and provided to us. The fact that this 1952 Oliver Freeman-bred release is actually an Arboretum introduction was nearly forgotten until recently, and even Michael Dirr in his *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants* (1998) erroneously stated that 'Pinkspire' (calling it 'Pink Spires') was selected by a "Dutch nurseryman." Although it was considered to be a significant improvement over existing varieties for its unfading pink flower color and is still grown to a very limited extent today, most gardeners will be far more familiar with its deeply-colored sport 'Ruby Spice'. This latter cultivar was discovered on 'Pinkspire', was introduced by Richard Jaynes in Rhode Island, and is by far the most strongly pink-flowered *Clethra*. Although the Arboretum lost its plants of *Clethra alnifolia* 'Pinkspire' many years ago, we still have a very good collection of Elizabeth White's American holly selections. Maybe one of them will hold the key to some future breeding breakthrough, too.