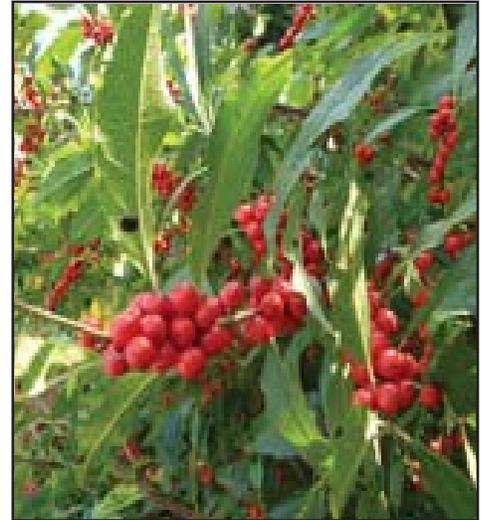


## Winterberry

by Dorothy G. Swift

*Ilex verticillata* is a very hardy (zones 3 to 8 or 9), deciduous shrub in the holly genus, *Ilex*. It has alternate oval leaves that are up to 3" long and up to 1" in width. A mature plant can be 6' to 10' tall with similar spread, although some cultivars are more compact, and pruning (in early spring) can keep them smaller. Winterberry has dense twiggy branches that grow in a zigzag pattern. Selectively pruning in the interior of the plant in early spring is recommended to make the growth less crowded and dense.

Plants of both sexes have tiny white or greenish flowers in spring—for males they occur in clusters in the leaf axils; for females they occur in singles or threes on short peduncles. (Female flowers have a plump round ovary at the center and vestigial stamens; male flowers have a greatly reduced center and prominent stamens with ample pollen). The fruit is a round berry, generally red and often produced in pairs along the stems. Placing a male plant within about 50' of a female plant is advisable for pollination.



Winterberry grows wild in swampy areas. It can readily adapt to drier garden conditions under cultivation, so it can be used in a variety of situations as individual or massed plants. An acid soil (pH 4.5 to 6.5) is needed preferably with high organic content. Optimal berry production occurs when a plant is in full sun, although many wild plants grow in wet areas in partial shade. Plants are generally available in nurseries in containers of 1 gallon and larger sizes, or as specimens (balled and in burlap). There are not generally any insect or disease problems.

Numerous cultivars have been introduced; 'Winter Red' is an excellent female, and 'Southern Gentleman' an excellent pollinator for it. Another pairing is 'Berry Heavy' with the pollinator 'Jim Dandy.' Make certain that you select male and female plants that flower at the same time.

### Propagation

**Rooting.** Winterberry may be propagated by softwood cuttings in late spring to early summer. Clip about 3-4" at the end of new growth. Keep cuttings moist until processed by putting stems in water or putting cuttings into a Ziploc bag and watering with a mist bottle.

A moist peat/perlite mix is suitable for rooting. Make a new cut on the stem bottom with a knife or pruner, and make wounds on 2 opposite sides of the stem by removing a very thin outer layer at the bottom ½" of stem with a sharp knife. Remove most of the leaves except for several at the top. Treat the stem with rooting hormone. Make a hole with a pencil in the peat-perlite mix, insert the cutting, and firm

the medium around the stem.

Best results come from placing the cuttings under mist in summer. (On a small scale, a Ziploc bag or a plastic tent can provide a humid environment, as long as care is taken that the atmosphere neither dries out nor is so moist that it encourages fungal growth). Light, but not direct unfiltered sun, is needed. Bottom heat can be desirable if the process extends into the cold season.

*Division.* Winterberry plants normally produce suckers, so that a shrub with multiple stems results. A suckering stem and its roots may be detached and potted to begin a new plant.

*Seed propagation.* Growth from seed is not difficult, but it is time consuming. Cultivars are popular, and rooting cuttings are quicker, so this method is less frequently used. Each berry has a small number of seeds. They have to be removed from the berry pulp. The berries may be added to a small amount of water and pulverized in a blender or mashed with a tool to break them up. They may then be further soaked, rinsed, and cleaned until all the pulp is removed.

Seeds require 60 to 120 days of warmth. (Place seeds in damp vermiculite in a plastic bag and hold in a warm place inside). Then they need a cold period (refrigerate for 3-4 months). Seeds can then be sown into a suitable germinating mix under warm conditions. They should be covered with 1/8" to 1/2" of the mix.

Alternatively, sow the cleaned seeds in flats and leave outdoors (protected from animal disturbance) until the seed germinates in 1 to 3 years. Pot seedlings individually and fertilize to produce more stem growth. A batch of seeds produces a mixture of male and female plants, and it is necessary to wait until flowers are produced to determine the sex of each winterberry seedling.

The annual care that a plant might need consists of careful pruning to keep it within the desired size and shape constraints and to keep it open, so that light penetrates into the center of the plant. Pruning should be undertaken after the berries have disappeared but well before the flowering season, so that berries are not lost. Plants will usually benefit by having a suitable mulch in the root zone, by application in late winter of a weak fertilizer intended to encourage flowering (high in phosphorus), and by regular watering during the first few years after planting.

## References

- Cullina, William. *Native Trees, Shrubs and Vines*. Houghton Mifflin. 20002  
Dirr, Michael A. *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants*, 6<sup>th</sup> Ed. Stipes Pub. 2009  
Swift, Dorothy G. "Winterberry Brightens the Dull Season," *Wildflora* V. 29, No 2, Sept. 2014.  
USDA website fact sheet for *Ilex verticillata*: [plants.usda.gov/factsheet/pdf/fs\\_ilve.pdf](https://plants.usda.gov/factsheet/pdf/fs_ilve.pdf)

## RIWPS Policy

Never dig plants in the wild or without the written permission of the landowner. Take seeds sparingly.

Note: "*Cultivation Note*" is a regular feature in *WildfloraRI*, the *Bulletin of the Rhode Island Wild Plant Society*. If you would be interested in writing a future cultivation note article or have suggestions of plants you would like to see included, please contact Dick Fisher at [Richard.Fisher2@cox.net](mailto:Richard.Fisher2@cox.net). The previous cultivation note topics are listed on the website and there is an easy to follow set of guidelines for the format of your article. — WildfloraRI Editorial Committee.

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