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Native Trees and Shrubs for Maine Landscapes

Winterberry

(Ilex verticillata)

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Go native!

This series of publications is the result of a five-year research project that evaluated the adaptability of a variety of native trees and shrubs to the stresses of urban and residential landscapes in Maine. Non-native invasive plants pose a serious threat to Maine's biodiversity. Plants such as Japanese barberry, shrubby honeysuckle, and Asiatic bittersweet, originally introduced for their ornamental features, have escaped from our landscapes, colonizing natural areas and displacing native plants and animals. By landscaping with native plants, we can create vegetation corridors that link fragmented wild areas, providing food and shelter for the native wildlife that is an integral part of our ecosystem. Your landscape choices can have an impact on the environment that goes far beyond your property lines.

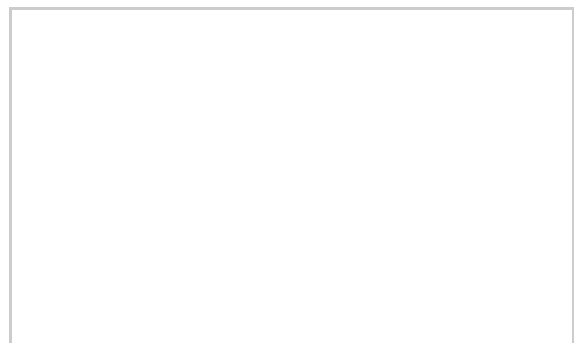
Description

Form: a multi-stemmed shrub with dense, slender, upright, spreading branches; often forms thickets

Size: 6 to 12 feet tall with similar spread

Ornamental characteristics:

- bright red berries on dark gray, leafless



stems are a focal point in the winter landscape



Photo by Reeser C. Manley

Landscape Use

Winterberry is an excellent choice for those spring-flooded sites that become dry in summer. It will tolerate both extremes of soil moisture, once established. Plant it with other native shrubs that will tolerate such conditions, including buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*), steeplebush (*Spiraea tomentosa*), and red osier dogwood (*Cornus sericea*).

Alternatively, consider using winterberry as an informal hedge behind the garden border, where its lustrous green foliage will be a handsome foil for summer flowers. The bright red berries of female plants will take center stage in winter if you plant a male or two nearby.



Photo by Reeser C. Manley

Culture

Hardiness: USDA zone 3b

Soil requirements: tolerant of wet soils

Light requirements: sun or part shade

Stress tolerances:

soil compaction—tolerant

pollution—somewhat tolerant

deicing salts—intolerant

urban heat islands—intolerant

drought—tolerant once established

seasonal flooding—very tolerant

Insect and disease problems: infrequent



Photo by Reeser C. Manley

Wildlife Value

The berries of winterberry are devoured by 49 species of birds, including songbirds, winter waterfowl, and game birds. Frequent songbird consumers include eastern bluebirds, hermit and wood thrushes, American robins, catbirds, northern mockingbirds, brown thrashers, cedar waxwings, and white-tailed sparrows. Because the berries are relatively low in fat content, they are often taken late in the winter when other fruits are scarce. This translates into a longer period in which we can enjoy the ornamental beauty of these winter fruits.

Raccoons and white-footed mice enjoy the fruits and seeds. Thoreau observed the mice, writing that they “run up the twigs at night and gather this shining fruit, take out the small seeds, and eat their kernels at the entrance to their burrows.”*

Deer also browse twigs and foliage of young plants.



Drawing by Margery Read

Maintenance

Irrigation: Water shrubs regularly for at least one year after planting. Apply 1 inch of water over the root zone once a week until leaves fall in autumn: in general, a shrub’s root zone extends twice as wide as its canopy. Once established, further watering should not be necessary unless there are extended periods of drought.

Fertilization: Landscape trees and shrubs should not be fertilized unless a soil test indicates a need. Correct soil pH, if necessary, by amending the backfill soil. No nitrogen fertilizer should be added at planting or during the first growing season.

To learn more about native woody plants

Visit the Eastern Maine Native Plant Arboretum at University of Maine Cooperative Extension's Penobscot County office, 307 Maine Avenue in Bangor. Established in 2004, the arboretum displays 24 different native tree and shrub species that can be used in managed landscapes.

Reviewed by Cathy Neal, Extension professor, University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension.

Photos by Reeser C. Manley.

Illustration by Margery Read, Extension master gardener.

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