

Winter Beauty with Winterberry

by Lyn Chimera

Winter months in the garden can be drab at best but a winterberry shrub with its bright red berries can brighten up any garden and provide food for birds, pollinators and small mammals as well.

Winterberry, (*Ilex verticillata*), is a member of the Holly family. It is a deciduous holly that is native to eastern North America where it typically occurs in swamps, damp thickets, low woods and along ponds and streams. This native shrub makes a great addition to the landscape as it provides nesting habitat and shelter for wildlife in the warmer months, its flowers are beneficial to pollinators including bees and butterflies, and it provides food throughout the winter for birds including robins and sparrows.

One of the benefits of including Winterberry in your landscape is that it can tolerate a wide variety of growing conditions. It prefers full sun for best flowering and berries but mine does well in partial shade. The soil pH can be acid to neutral. While winterberry prefers moist soil it does well with normal watering in the garden. It will not flower or berry well if the soil is very dry. The shrub grows 6-10 feet high and 6-8 feet wide. Unlike some hollies this shrub is deciduous, it drops its leaves in the winter. One caveat about growing winterberry is it is dioecious which

means you need male and female plants. One male shrub can support several females.

Besides the beautiful red berries which will persist when branches are cut for winter decorations, Winterberry has many ecological benefits. It plays a crucial role in supporting local ecosystems and provides shelter and food for wildlife, creating a thriving habitat. These shrubs attract pollinators in early spring, are a host for butterflies and moths, and food for songbirds and small mammals. If you have the space and conditions why not grow your own!



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