



Alabama's *TREASURED Forests*
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Yaupon

(*Ilex vomitoria*)

By Fred Nation, Environmental Services, Baldwin County

Yaupon is a large shrub or small tree in the holly family. It sometimes grows into an irregular tree to about 25 feet tall, but is most often seen as a colonial shrub. The bark is thin, smooth, pale gray or gray-brown in color. The leaves are evergreen, simple, alternate; the blades are oval, leathery, dark green, up to about 1½ inches long. Blount, rounded teeth along the leaf margins are quite distinctive, and make yaupon easy to distinguish from the dozen or so holly species that are found in Alabama. Yaupon is native to the coastal plain, from Virginia to central Florida, west through southern Alabama to eastern coastal Texas. It has been widely cultivated, and is now naturalized in a variety of habitats throughout the southeast.

Like other hollies, *Ilex vomitoria* is dioecious, which means that male and female flowers are borne on separate plants. Only the female plants produce the small, spherical, shiny red fruits that mature in great quantities along the stems in the fall of the year. These fruits (drupes) are an important winter food source for many bird species, including quail, wild turkeys, and bluebirds. The foliage and twigs are browsed year-round by white-tailed deer. Yaupon is an early succession species that quickly colonizes burned or timbered land, providing good cover and forage for wildlife.

Yaupon is one of our most historic native plants. Early European settlers discovered, or they learned from the Indians, that it contains a stimulant that we know today as caffeine. They roasted the leaves and twigs to increase the solubility of the caffeine, and boiled them to make passable substitutes for tea and coffee. Native American tribes throughout the southeast – including the Alabamas, Cherokees, and Creeks – venerated yaupon, and they used it in their religious and purification ceremonies. A strong ceremonial beverage, brewed from the dried or roasted leaves and twigs, was called the “black drink.” In his “Travels,” William Bartram describes in great detail an elaborate black drink ceremony which he was privileged to attend in December, 1775, at the Creek Indian village of Otassee, in present-day Macon County, Alabama. What was the effect of drinking copious quantities of the black drink? For the answer, take a close look at yaupon’s scientific name: *Ilex vomitoria*!

As an ornamental landscape plant, yaupon has few equals. Cultivars have been developed with a compact, rounded habit that can be intensely pruned into formal hedges or topiaries. Cascading or “weeping” forms have been bred, as well as tall, columnar varieties for informal hedges and corner plantings. Yaupon is a trouble-free shrub or tree of manageable size that feeds the birds, looks great, even in the winter, and it is native. What else could we ask for in a landscape plant?

According to the current listing of “Champion Trees of Alabama,” *Ilex vomitoria* is a species without a state champion. A specimen about 20 feet tall, with a trunk circumference of 12 inches or so would be a respectable state champion for this historic and beautiful Alabama native. The champion tree list is available online, at www.forestry.alabama.gov in the “Market & Informational Resources” section. ♻️



Photo by Fred Nation