

Ilex decidua: Possumhaw¹

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Introduction

This native North American tree is often seen as a spreading 8 to 10-foot-high shrub but can also become a 20-foot-tall tree when planted in partial shade. Although the two to three-inch-long, dark green leaves are deciduous they do not present any appreciable fall color change. From March to May, small white flowers appear among the leaves. These blooms are followed by the production of small fruits which become orange/red when they ripen in early autumn. Since male trees will not fruit, be sure to purchase females so you will not miss the abundant fruit production. These fruits persist on the tree throughout the winter and are quite showy against the bare branches. After the fruits have been exposed to freezing and thawing, they become a favorite food source of many birds and mammals.



Figure 1. Middle-aged *Ilex decidua*: Possumhaw
Credits: Ed Gilman

General Information

Scientific name: *Ilex decidua*

Pronunciation: EYE-lecks dee-SID-yoo-uh

Common name(s): Possumhaw

Family: *Aquifoliaceae*

USDA hardiness zones: 5A through 9A (Fig. 2)

Origin: native to North America

Invasive potential: little invasive potential

Uses: reclamation; deck or patio; specimen; highway median; Bonsai; container or planter

Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the tree

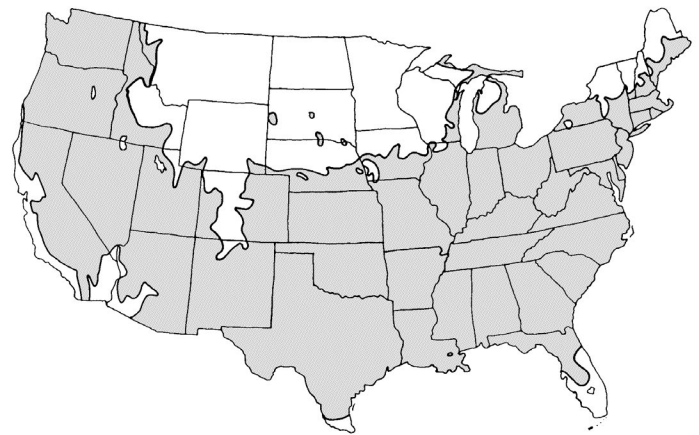


Figure 2. Range

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Description

Height: 10 to 15 feet
Spread: 10 to 15 feet
Crown uniformity: symmetrical
Crown shape: vase, round
Crown density: dense
Growth rate: slow
Texture: fine

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)
Leaf type: simple
Leaf margin: serrulate, crenate
Leaf shape: elliptic (oval), obovate, oblong
Leaf venation: brachidodrome, pinnate
Leaf type and persistence: deciduous
Leaf blade length: less than 2 inches, 2 to 4 inches
Leaf color: green
Fall color: no color change
Fall characteristic: not showy



Figure 3. Foliage

Flower

Flower color: white/cream/gray
Flower characteristics: not showy

Fruit

Fruit shape: round
Fruit length: less than .5 inch
Fruit covering: fleshy
Fruit color: red, orange
Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; showy; fruit/leaves not a litter problem

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: branches droop; not showy; typically multi-trunked; thorns
Pruning requirement: little required
Breakage: resistant
Current year twig color: gray, brown
Current year twig thickness: thin
Wood specific gravity: unknown

Culture

Light requirement: full sun, partial sun or partial shade, shade tolerant
Soil tolerances: clay; sand; loam; alkaline; acidic; extended flooding; well-drained
Drought tolerance: high
Aerosol salt tolerance: unknown

Other

Roots: not a problem
Winter interest: yes
Outstanding tree: yes
Ozone sensitivity: unknown
Verticillium wilt susceptibility: resistant
Pest resistance: free of serious pests and diseases

Use and Management

These small trees grow with many thin, grey trunks or stems arising from the ground in a clumping fashion. There are so many of them and they are so thick that they can act as a screen. Lower branches are often removed to form a small tree with a tight head of foliage along the outer portion of the crown. Interior leaves are often shaded out and drop from the tree. If lower branches are not removed, the plant develops into a large, spreading mound of foliage. Often found along stream banks in the wild, Possumhaw tolerates wet soil and can be used to stabilize stream banks. It can also be utilized as a large accent shrub or small tree planted in a lawn area as a specimen. Allow for plenty of room for this plant to spread since they look their best when they develop a symmetrical canopy.

Possumhaw should be grown in full sun or partial shade on acid or alkaline, well-drained, moist soil. They would make a good plant for water retention ponds and other areas which regularly accumulate water.

There are variety of cultivars developed for fruit color, fruit persistence and tree habit including: 'Byers Golden' - yellow fruit; Council Fire' - persistent orange-red fruit well into the winter; 'Sentry' - hardy only to zone 6, columnar habit makes it potentially suited for planting in highway medians. There are other cultivars.

Pests and Diseases

There do not appear to be many serious problems affecting this tree.