

Lycium carolinianum Christmas Berry, Carolina Desert-thorn¹

Edward F. Gilman, Ryan W. Klein, and Gail Hansen²

Introduction

Lycium carolinianum is a small shrub that is commonly found in the southeastern United States at the edge of salt marshes and on sandy shell mounds. This 6 to 10 foot tall shrub has rigid branches that are sharply thorn-tipped. The tiny deciduous leaves of this plant are succulent and linear to oblanceolate in shape. Flowers are solitary in the leaf axils and are borne on slender flower stalks. These autumn flowers are blue, white, or lavender and have purple streaks. The flowers are followed by large, bright, lustrous red berries that ripen in late autumn or early winter. Birds love to eat the ripe berries.



Figure 1. Full Form - *Lycium carolinianum*: Christmas Berry, Carolina Desert-thorn

Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS



Figure 2. Leaf - *Lycium carolinianum*: Christmas Berry, Carolina Desert-thorn

Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS



Figure 3. Fruit - *Lycium carolinianum*: Christmas Berry, Carolina Desert-thorn

Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS

1. This document is FPS-356, one of a series of the Department of Environmental Horticulture, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date October 1999. Revised October 2023. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication.
2. Edward F. Gilman, professor emeritus; Ryan W. Klein, assistant professor, arboriculture; and Gail Hansen, professor, sustainable landscape design; Department of Environmental Horticulture, UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. For more information on obtaining other UF/IFAS Extension publications, contact your county's UF/IFAS Extension office. U.S. Department of Agriculture, UF/IFAS Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A & M University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Andra Johnson, dean for UF/IFAS Extension.



Figure 4. Bark - *Lycium carolinianum*: Christmas Berry, Carolina Desert-thorn

Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS

General Information

Scientific name: *Lycium carolinianum*

Pronunciation: LYE-see-um KAIR-roe-lin-nee-AY-num

Common name(s): Christmas berry, Carolina desert-thorn

Family: *Solanaceae*

Plant type: shrub

USDA hardiness zones: 7B through 11 (Figure 5)

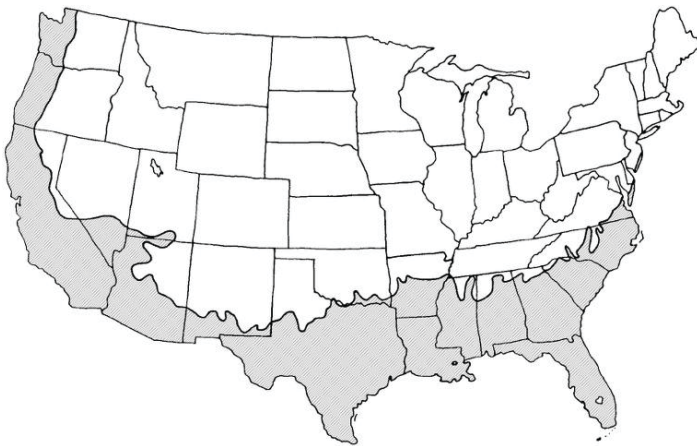


Figure 5. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Planting month for zone 7: year round

Planting month for zone 8: year round

Planting month for zone 9: year round

Planting month for zone 10: year round

Origin: native to Florida

Invasive potential: native plant that often reproduces into nearby landscapes

Uses: border

Availability: grown in small quantities by a small number of nurseries

Description

Height: 4 to 8 feet

Spread: 3 to 6 feet

Plant habit: vase shape

Plant density: moderate

Growth rate: moderate

Texture: fine

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: entire

Leaf shape: oblanceolate

Leaf venation: none, or difficult to see

Leaf type and persistence: evergreen

Leaf blade length: less than 2 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: no fall color change

Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: blue; white; yellow

Flower characteristic: summer flowering; fall flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: oval

Fruit length: 3 to 6 inches

Fruit cover: fleshy

Fruit color: red

Fruit characteristic: attracts birds

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: thorns present; not particularly showy

Current year stem/twig color: gray/silver

Current year stem/twig thickness: thin

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in part shade/part sun

Soil tolerances: extended flooding; acidic; alkaline; sand; loam; clay

Drought tolerance: Unknown

Soil salt tolerances: good

Plant spacing: 36 to 60 inches

Other

Roots: sprouts from roots or lower trunk

Winter interest: plant has winter interest due to unusual form, nice persistent fruits, showy winter trunk, or winter flowers

Outstanding plant: not particularly outstanding

Pest resistance: long-term health usually not affected by pests

Use and Management

The Christmas berry makes a wonderful specimen plant and forms a nice border. Its fine texture compliments and contrasts most other plants in the landscape. It can be trained into a small multi-trunked tree for the patio or garden, or it can be grown in a container or raised planter.

The Christmas berry is very tolerant to salt spray and drought conditions and is great for coastal plantings. In addition to its native sandy dune habitat, Christmas berry can be found naturally along the edges of ponds, salty marshes, and waterways. Plant this shrub on a well-drained or wet site that receives full sun or partial shade. Non-irrigated

plants drop leaves in dry weather as a drought avoidance mechanism, but the next wet period brings new leaves. Growth is thin and the plant forms an open canopy in the shade. Suckers regularly form at the base of the trunks, creating a multi-trunked thicket. These will have to be periodically removed to maintain a neat appearance.

Pests and Diseases

There are few important problems growing this native plant.