

2018 Native Plant of the Year Winner



Photographer Jamie Harpootlian

Ilex vomitoria, commonly known as Yaupon holly, is the Garden Club of South Carolina's 2018 SC Native Plant of the Year. The Columbia Garden Club nominated this native for the following reasons:

The Yaupon holly deserves recognition because it is an American treasure and one of South Carolina's best native ornamentals. The Yaupon is a medium evergreen shrub or small tree (15' – 30' tall) that bears beautiful translucent red berries in the winter and prolific, small white flowers in the spring. It is a source of nectar and pollen for bees and butterflies, a larval host to the Henry's Elfin butterfly, a food source for songbirds and a variety of other wildlife such as turkeys, raccoons, squirrels, and bears, and year-round cover for a variety of wildlife including nesting birds. Beekeepers have been known to put their hives near Yaupons to collect nectar from the spring flowers. The Yaupon is adaptable to a wide variety of soils and climate conditions. Moderately fast growing and winter hardy, the Yaupon also has good resistance to diseases and insects. In the landscape,

the Yaupon can serve many purposes such as providing a hedge, screen, or windbreak barrier, or it can be pruned into a tree-shape or naturalized in a woodland landscape. The Yaupon's winter berries make its branches quite desirable for holiday decorating.

The Yaupon has an interesting history. Many Native American Indian tribes boiled the leaves and twigs to create a caffeinated tea (the Yaupon is the only native caffeinated plant in the United States) that was used in purification ceremonies involving self-induced vomiting (lending the plant its species name, *Ilex vomitoria*). Based on this fact, the Yaupon has falsely been assumed to be an emetic, which it is not, although the berries are toxic. During times of war, Southerners deprived of regular tea and coffee made Yaupon tea. It remained popular among Southern Americans into the 20th century. Today a company called ASI Tea based in Savannah, Georgia markets an organic Yaupon tea which they wild-harvest from places like the Palmetto Bluff Conservancy in Bluffton, South Carolina.