

Dwarf Youpon Holly may be the answer to your gardening challenges.

Are you one of those people who can't get anything to grow in your garden? Instead of a green thumb perhaps you have a brown thumb? You may want to look into Dwarf Youpon Holly (*Ilex vomitoria nana*). This shrub is not prone to insect or disease problems. It stays attractive throughout the year and needs little if any maintenance. It grows fairly rapidly and is drought tolerant.

Youpon holly has been deemed "the most versatile native shrub available in the landscape trade." (Glover) The attractive plant has dark green evergreen leaves which contrast nicely with the bright red berries it produces. It will grow in shade or full sunlight. The more light the plant receives, the more dense the foliage will be. It will even tolerate short term freezes.

The plant may reach heights of 2 to 3 feet and has a spread of about 4 feet. It has light gray bark and the leaves are alternate and ovate to elliptical. The white flowers the holly produces are approximately 1 – 2 inches in diameter. The fruit is small and round, about ¼" in diameter. The dwarf holly grows fairly rapidly and makes an excellent ground cover. It is not very particular about the soil type it is planted in and will grow most anywhere.

Youpon holly also provides food for our winged friends. Many types of birds including the Eastern Bluebird, American Robin, Northern Mockingbird and Bobwhite Quail are attracted to the bright red berries. Many mammals, such as the Nine-Banded Armadillo, American Black Bear, Gray Fox, raccoon and skunks also love to snack on the fruit. The leaves and twigs are browsed by White-Tailed Deer. It serves as an important food source especially in the winter when other fare may be scarce. The foliage provides cover and nesting sites for many critters as well.

You can see that this hardy holly is easy to grow, versatile, attractive and a wildlife attractor. But it has been useful throughout history for other reasons as well. The Native Americans used the leaves and stems to brew a tea called black drink or asi. This drink was consumed only by the males of the tribes and was used as purification in their ceremonies and rituals. The reason the plant was named *Ilex vomitoria nana* is because when consumed, the plant would cause many of those who drank it to vomit.

There are many theories on the reason the plant caused this reaction. The Europeans, after watching the ritual, believed that just by consuming the drink, one would upchuck. However, it is said that the reason the reaction was caused is simply because the plant contains caffeine and when drinking great quantities of it, after intense fasting, the result is obvious. Another theory is that if the drink was not prepared properly the end result would be that by consuming it one would vomit. The Indians would dry the leaves until they turned black and crumbly, and then steep them in hot water. If the leaves were used without going through this drying process, the digestive system would be upset.

The beautiful dark green foliage and bright red berries make the plant popular at Christmas for decorations. The plants are often trimmed into hedges for natural screening or borders and used in the art of topiary or plant sculpture since it prunes so easily.

Propagation of the plant is relatively easy. It sprouts readily from roots and birds also help with dispersal. It grows in scrub, upland forests and even coastal areas and can be grown from seeds or soft wood cuttings. Dwarf Youpon Holly will be one of the plants offered at the Air Potato Exchange Day on January 9th.

The first of four workshops on Florida's invasive exotic plants is scheduled for September 18th at 1:00 pm at the Bert J. Harris Agriculture Center Auditorium. There is no charge and participants will have the opportunity to learn about and identify the different types of exotics in Highlands County. There will be door prizes and refreshments. It will also be a chance to find out more about the upcoming Air Potato Exchange Day where a free native plant will be offered in exchange for a bag of air potato bulbs. If you want more information on the program, feel free to call Corine at (863) 402-6545.