**Ilex opaca ‘Slim Jim’**

‘Slim Jim’ American Holly¹

Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson²

INTRODUCTION

A popular landscape plant since the beginning of American history, this broad-leafed evergreen has served a variety of uses through the years (Fig. 1). The American Indians used preserved Holly berries as decorative buttons and were much sought after by other tribes who bartered for them. The wood has been used for making canes, scroll work and furniture, and has even been substituted for ebony in inlay work when stained black.

GENERAL INFORMATION

- **Scientific name:** *Ilex opaca* ‘Slim Jim’
- **Pronunciation:** EYE-lecks oh-PAY-kuh
- **Common name(s):** ‘Slim Jim’ American Holly
- **Family:** Aquifoliaceae
- **USDA hardiness zones:** 6 through 9 (Fig. 2)
- **Origin:** native to North America
- **Uses:** Bonsai; hedge; recommended for buffer strips around parking lots or for median strip plantings in the highway; reclamation plant; screen; specimen; sidewalk cutout (tree pit); residential street tree; tree has been successfully grown in urban areas where air pollution, poor drainage, compacted soil, and/or drought are common
- **Availability:** grown in small quantities by a small number of nurseries

**DESCRIPTION**

- **Height:** 30 to 50 feet
- **Spread:** 10 to 15 feet

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Crown uniformity: symmetrical canopy with a regular (or smooth) outline, and individuals have more or less identical crown forms
Crown shape: columnar; pyramidal
Crown density: dense
Growth rate: slow
Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)
Leaf type: simple
Leaf margin: entire; pectinate; spiny
Leaf shape: elliptic (oval); lanceolate
Leaf venation: banchidodrome; pinnate
Leaf type and persistence: broadleaf evergreen; evergreen
Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches; less than 2 inches
Leaf color: green
Fall color: no fall color change
Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: green; white
Flower characteristics: pleasant fragrance; inconspicuous and not showy

Fruit

Fruit shape: round
Fruit length: < .5 inch
Fruit covering: fleshy
Fruit color: red
Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; no significant litter problem; persistent on the tree; showy

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: bark is thin and easily damaged from mechanical impact; droop as the tree grows, and will require pruning for vehicular or pedestrian clearance beneath the canopy; not particularly showy; should be grown with a single leader; no thorns
Pruning requirement: needs little pruning to develop a strong structure
Breakage: resistant
Flowers appear on separate trees and trees of both sexes must be located in the same neighborhood to ensure production of berries on the female plants. American Holly is ideal for use as a street tree (with lower branches removed), framing tree, specimen, barrier planting or screen. Roots are shallow and finely branched, and rarely invasive due to their great number and relatively small diameter. This native tree is ideal for naturalizing on moist, slightly acid soils, and the fruit is very attractive to wildlife, serving as an excellent food source. A 35-foot-tall tree can be 20 feet wide in 40 years.

Growing well in full sun to partial shade, American Holly should be located on fertile, well-drained but moist, slightly acid soils below 6.5 pH. Berry production is highest in full sun on female trees. American Holly foliage thins during drought but insect and disease infestations are usually minimal.

See the species for other cultivars.

Propagation is by cuttings or grafting.

**Pests**

Holly leaf miner larvae mines out the leaf middle leaving yellow or brown trails.

Scales of various types may infest Holly.

Spider mites cause discoloration and speckling of Holly foliage.

**Diseases**

Tar spot may occasionally cause small yellow spots on the leaves in early summer. Eventually the spots turn reddish brown with narrow yellow borders. Leaves may not drop prematurely but the infected areas drop out leaving holes in the leaves. Gather up and destroy badly infected leaves.

Many different fungi cause leaf spots on Holly. Reduce the injury caused by leaf spots by keeping trees healthy. Dispose of diseased leaves.

Cankers caused by several different fungi lead to sunken areas on stems and plant dieback. Keep trees healthy and prune out infected branches.

Spine spot is small gray or yellow spots with purple margins and is caused by spines of one leaf puncturing an adjacent leaf.
Chlorosis symptoms are light green or yellowish leaves with darker green veins. This problem is often due to a high pH leading to iron deficiency. Use acidifying fertilizers and sulfur to bring down the pH. Sprays of iron chelate will green up plants.

In northern climates, Hollies sometimes scorch during the late winter due to rapid and wide temperature fluctuations. Shade plants during the winter to prevent the problem.

Purple blotches on the leaves are caused by some environmental factor such as nutrient deficiencies, drought, and winter injury.

Black root rot can be damaging.