



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 (Fig. 1). 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.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Scientific name: *Ilex decidua*

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

Common name(s): Possumhaw

Family: *Aquifoliaceae*

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

Origin: native to North America

Uses: Bonsai; container or above-ground planter; recommended for buffer strips around parking lots or for median strip plantings in the highway; near a deck or patio; reclamation plant; specimen; no proven urban tolerance

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

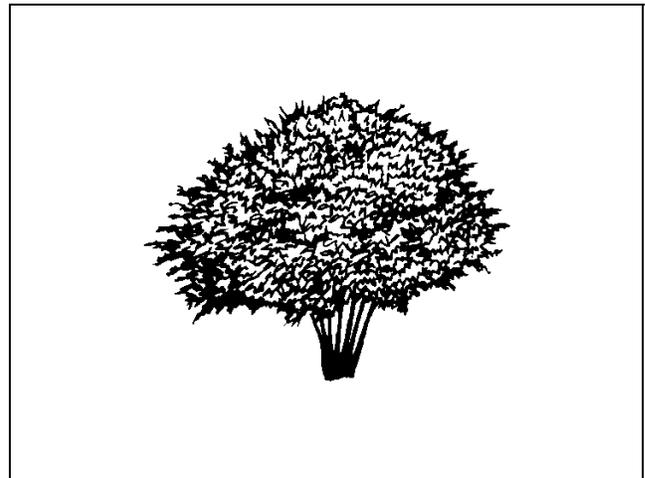


Figure 1. Middle-aged Possumhaw.

DESCRIPTION

Height: 10 to 15 feet

Spread: 10 to 15 feet

Crown uniformity: symmetrical canopy with a regular (or smooth) outline, and individuals have more or less identical crown forms

Crown shape: round; vase shape

Crown density: dense

Growth rate: slow

Texture: fine

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: crenate; serrulate

Leaf shape: elliptic (oval); oblong; obovate

1. This document is adapted from Fact Sheet ST-302, a series of the Environmental Horticulture Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Publication date: November 1993.
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Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Leaf venation: banchidodrome; pinnate
Leaf type and persistence: deciduous
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: white
Flower characteristics: inconspicuous and not showy; spring flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: round
Fruit length: < .5 inch
Fruit covering: fleshy
Fruit color: orange; 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; routinely grown with, or trainable to be grown with, multiple trunks; not particularly showy; no thorns
Pruning requirement: needs little pruning to develop a strong structure
Breakage: resistant
Current year twig color: brown; gray
Current year twig thickness: thin

Culture

Light requirement: tree grows in part shade/part sun; tree grows in the shade; tree grows in full sun
Soil tolerances: clay; loam; sand; acidic; alkaline; extended flooding; well-drained
Drought tolerance: high

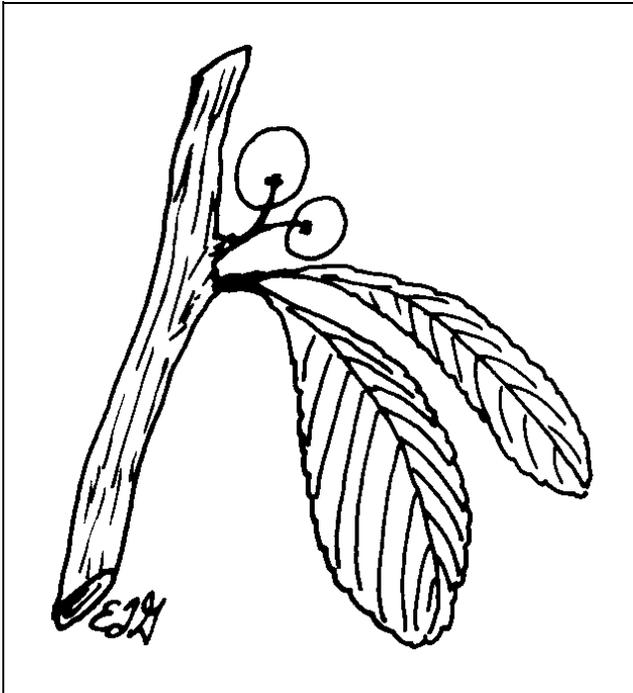


Figure 3. Foliage of Possumhaw.

Other

Roots: surface roots are usually not a problem

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

Outstanding tree: tree has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more

Invasive potential: little, if any, potential at this time

Verticillium wilt susceptibility: not known to be susceptible

Pest resistance: no pests are normally seen on the tree

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.