

Dahoon Holly Tree: A Festive Seasonal Beauty

Lake County Factsheet #HYG2408

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When I spot a tree adorned with red berries, my curiosity piques, and I wonder if the berries might be as tasty as they appear. My artistic instincts also come alive; thinking of how to incorporate the branches into a beautiful floral arrangement or even painting the tree would be a fun project. My photographer's eye takes over, too, snapping pictures of those brilliant red berries against the backdrop of green leaves. This tree that caught my attention upon moving to Florida is the Dahoon Holly (*Ilex cassine*), a plant that has both fascinated and inspired me to write.

Tree description

The Dahoon Holly is a small to medium-sized tree, typically growing up to 40 feet tall, with glossy, elliptical leaves. In the warmer months, it produces clusters of small white-green flowers, but the vibrant red berries that appear in fall and winter make this tree stand out. The berries, measuring 2 to 4 inches, offer a burst of color in the landscape, making it a favorite among gardeners and nature lovers. Dahoon Holly is adaptable, thriving in various soil types, including clay, sand, loam, slightly acidic, or alkaline. It grows well in wet and well-drained conditions, adding seasonal interest to any garden.

One attractive characteristic of the Dahoon Holly is its dioecious nature, meaning that male and female flowers grow on separate trees. It is necessary to plant at least one male and one female tree in proximity for the tree to produce berries. Holly trees have a rich history of human use. Native American tribes preserved holly berries to create decorative buttons that traded among tribes. The wood was appreciated and used too.

Hollies and Wildlife

Beyond human use, holly trees play an essential role in the ecosystem. The bright red berries are an important food source for birds and other wildlife, particularly during the colder months when other food sources may be scarce. Holly trees also provide wildlife shelter with dense foliage, creating a valuable habitat.

True Hollies: A Brief Overview of *Ilex*

Hollies belong to the *Ilex* genus, the sole genus in the Aquifoliaceae family, which includes hundreds of species distributed worldwide. True hollies, such as Dahoon Holly, are characterized by glossy leaves and bright berries.

It is essential to distinguish between native holly species like Dahoon Holly and non-native plants misidentified as hollies. For example, the Brazilian Pepper Tree, often called "Florida Holly," is neither a true holly nor native to Florida. It is, in fact, an invasive species that poses a threat to local ecosystems.

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Dahoon Holly Tree: A Festive Seasonal Beauty - continued

A Resilient and Hardy Tree

Dahoon Holly is not only beautiful but also hardy and low-maintenance. It thrives in full sun to partial shade and is adaptable to various soil types. The tree has moderate drought and salt spray tolerance, making it well-suited for coastal and inland areas. Its roots are non-invasive and resistant to many pests and diseases, adding to its appeal as an easy-care ornamental tree.

A Seasonal Showstopper

With its glossy green leaves and bright red berries, the Dahoon Holly embodies the spirit of the holiday season, adding a cheerful touch to the Florida landscape. Whether you are a birdwatcher, an artist, or simply someone who enjoys the beauty of nature, the Dahoon Holly is sure to inspire. Whether you admire it in the wild or incorporate it into your landscape, this native tree brings a vibrant and festive atmosphere wherever it grows.



Brazilian Pepper: Brazilian Pepper is not a true holly and is not native to Florida, it is an invasive species.



Holly: Dahoon Holly tree at the Discovery Gardens, located at the UF/IFAS Lake County Extension Office.



Holly 2: Dahoon Holly tree flowers.



Holly 3: Dahoon Holly tree berries.

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