
Wildflower Spot – February 2008
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

POSSUM-HAW

Ilex decidua

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

The bright colored berries of possum-haw create a striking effect in the winter landscape. Shrubby or growing to small-tree size, this holly drops its blunt-toothed leaves in the fall revealing many small orange or red berries (drupes) along leafless slender gray twigs. The dark green, glossy leaves are widest above the middle and wedge-shaped at the base. They turn a soft yellow in the fall before dropping. The leaves are generally thinner than those of yaupon holly, which has smaller, evergreen leaves.

The inconspicuous flowers, which appear in the spring, are greenish-white and in small clusters. Keep in mind that as in the case of American Holly, with Possum-haw both a tree bearing male flowers and a tree bearing female flowers are required for berry formation.

This very adaptable shrub prefers well-drained,



acidic soil with average moisture. Try growing it in low spots or along ponds or streams in moist soil, and give it plenty of space to stretch its branches. Its native habitat is swamps and wet woods, chiefly on the coastal plain from D.C. to Florida and Texas and in the Mississippi Embayment region.

Possum-haw is effective as a single specimen, in groups or as a hedge (“haw” comes from the same root as “hedge”). Opossums, raccoons and other mammals eat the fruit, as well as songbirds and game birds. Bluebirds especially like the fruit. ❖

Photo: Possum-haw (*Ilex decidua*) from Native Plant Society of Texas website.
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.