UF IFAS Extension UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ PROGRAM

ENH461
doi.org/10.32473/EDIS-ST302-1993

Ilex decidua: Possumhaw[1]

Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson[2]

https://ffl.ifas.ufl.edu/

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. 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.



Figure 1. Middle-aged *Ilex decidua*: Possumhaw
Credit: Ed Gilman

General Information

Scientific name: *Ilex decidua*

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

Common name(s): Possumhaw

Family: *Aquifoliaceae*

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

Origin: native to North America

Invasive potential: little invasive potential

Uses: reclamation; deck or patio; specimen; highway median; Bonsai; container or planter

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

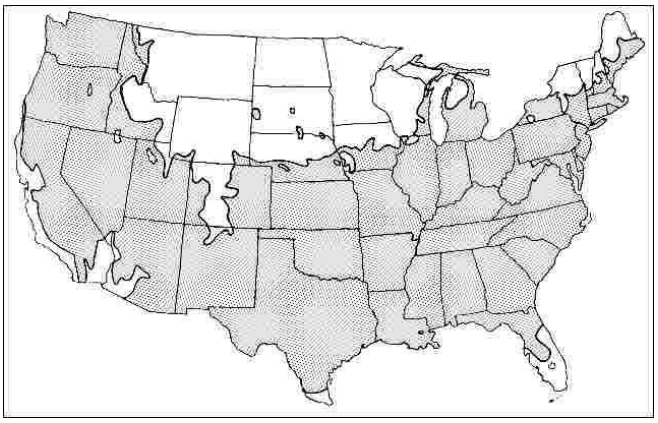

Figure 2. Range

Description

Height: 10 to 15 feet

Spread: 10 to 15 feet

Crown uniformity: symmetrical

Crown shape: vase, round

Crown density: dense

Growth rate: slow

Texture: fine

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: serrulate, crenate

Leaf shape: elliptic (oval), obovate, oblong

Leaf venation: brachidodrome, pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: deciduous

Leaf blade length: less than 2 inches, 2 to 4 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: no color change

Fall characteristic: not showy

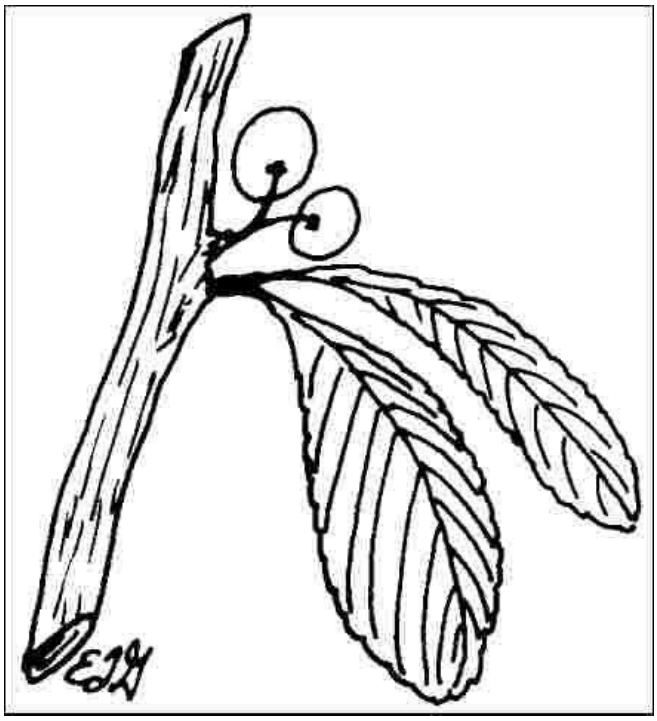

Figure 3. Foliage

Flower

Flower color: white/cream/gray

Flower characteristics: not showy

Fruit

Fruit shape: round

Fruit length: less than .5 inch

Fruit covering: fleshy

Fruit color: red, orange

Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; showy; fruit/leaves not a litter problem

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: branches droop; not showy; typically multi-trunked; thorns

Pruning requirement: little required

Breakage: resistant

Current year twig color: gray, brown

Current year twig thickness: thin

Wood specific gravity: unknown

Culture

Light requirement: full sun, partial sun or partial shade, shade tolerant

Soil tolerances: clay; sand; loam; alkaline; acidic; extended flooding; well-drained

Drought tolerance: high

Aerosol salt tolerance: unknown

Other

Roots: not a problem

Winter interest: yes

Outstanding tree: yes

Ozone sensitivity: unknown

Verticillium wilt susceptibility: resistant

Pest resistance: free of serious pests and diseases

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.

[1] This document is ENH461, one of a series of the UF/IFAS Department of Environmental Horticulture Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date November 1993. Revised December 2006. Reviewed February 2014. Visit the Ask IFAS website at https://ask.ifas.ufl.edu for the currently supported version of this publication. © UF/IFAS. This publication is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 *To learn more about creating and maintaining attractive landscapes that protect Florida's water and natural resources, visit ffl.ifas.ufl.edu/.*

[2] Edward F. Gilman, professor emeritus, UF/IFAS Department of Environmental Horticulture; Dennis G. Watson, former associate professor, UF/IFAS Department of Agricultural and Biological Engineering, Gainesville, FL 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information, and other services only to individuals and institutions that operate in compliance with applicable federal and state non-discrimination laws and policies. For more information on obtaining other UF/IFAS Extension publications, contact your county's UF/IFAS Extension office. U.S. Department of Agriculture, UF/IFAS Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A&M University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Andra Johnson, Dean for UF/IFAS Extension.