

Ilex vomitoria

[Synonyms : *Ilex caroliniana*, *Ilex cassine*]

YAUPON is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to the south-eastern United States it has tiny, greenish-white flowers.

It is also known as Alabama dahoon, Appalachian holly, Appalachian tea, Black drink plant, Carolina tea, Carolina tea holly, Cassena, Cassena-bush, Cassena holly, Cassia-berry bush, Cassine, Cassioberry, Christmasberry, Dahoon, Dahoon holly, Deerberry, Emetic holly, Evergreen cassena, Evergreen holly, Florida holly, Hendersonwood, Indian berry, Indian black drink, Indian purge, Indian tea, Poison cherry, South Sea tea, Swamp cherry, True cassena, Winter cherry, Yaupon holly, and Yaupon tea.

Warning - the red berries are mildly poisonous, especially for young children who can be attracted to them. They can cause vomiting and diarrhoea.

Vomitoria is derived from Latin *vomitum* (to vomit) meaning ‘causing vomiting’.

Unlike the berries of winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*) those of yaupon (tiny translucent, bright red or yellowish) seem rarely to be of interest to birds.

North American Seminole Indians used the wood for their hunting arrows and ramrods.

Boiled dried leaves made a thick ‘black drink’ used by North American Indian tribes, including the Alabama, in purification rituals (especially before hunting or harvest festivals) – while an infusion made a tea. Both leaves and tea were often traded between the tribes. In some tribes the black drink was only taken by the strongest men – and in the past the most courageous warriors. It caused vomiting (for which purpose it was certainly used by the Cherokee, Natchez, Alabama and Creek Indians), and when part of the ritual before feasting it enabled participants to eat more than would normally be possible. The Creek and Alabama Indians are said to have toasted the leaves before using them to make the tea.

Past significance of the ‘black drink’ is illustrated by customs that, although varying from tribe to tribe, appeared to have a fairly constant theme and were witnessed by early settlers.

The liquid was vulnerable to evil adulteration by the close proximity or movement of women when the men were preparing it or drinking it and this could mean their (the men’s) ultimate death. In effect this meant that if a woman moved a hair’s breadth or came too close all the liquid had to be discarded. Authorities note that first reports of the concoction arrived from Florida in 1562.

Early European settlers learnt to make an infusion of the leaves and produced a stimulating drink similar to coffee or tea but it was far less potent than the ‘black drink’ form prepared by the Indians.

Like white holly (*Ilex opaca*), yaupon is also popular locally for Christmas decorations.