



Cooperative Extension Service
Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

Ilex decidua 'Council Fire'¹

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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* 'Council Fire'

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

Common name(s): 'Council Fire' Possumhaw

Family: *Aquifoliaceae*

Plant type: shrub

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

Planting month for zone 7: year round

Planting month for zone 8: year round

Planting month for zone 9: year round

Origin: native to North America

Uses: 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; specimen; residential street

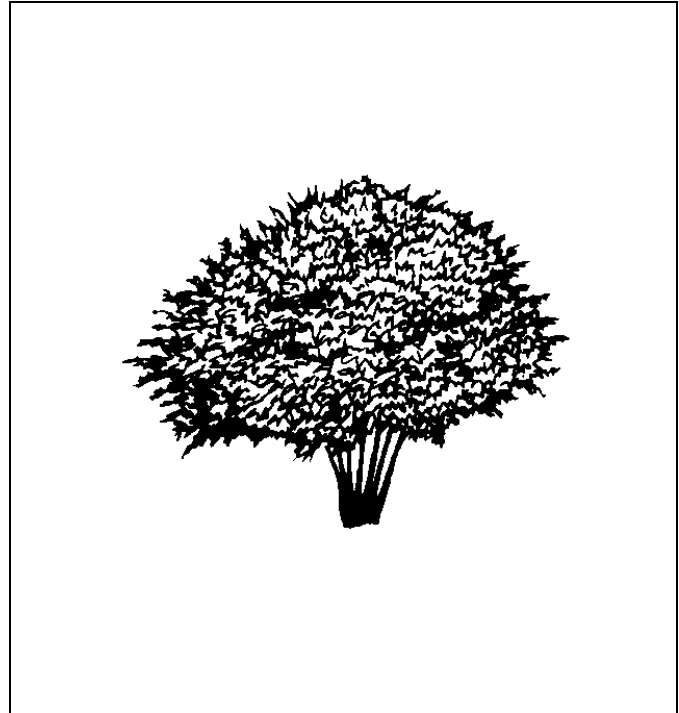


Figure 1. 'Council Fire' Possumhaw.

tree; medium-sized parking lot islands (100-200 square feet in size); large parking lot islands (> 200 square feet in size); small parking lot islands (< 100 square feet in size); narrow tree lawns (3-4 feet wide); medium-sized tree lawns (4-6 feet wide); wide tree lawns (>6 feet wide)

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

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Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Description

Height: 12 to 18 feet
Spread: 8 to 12 feet
Plant habit: vase shape
Plant density: dense
Growth rate: slow
Texture: fine

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate
Leaf type: simple
Leaf margin: serrulate
Leaf shape: obovate; elliptic (oval)
Leaf venation: pinnate
Leaf type and persistence: deciduous
Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches
Leaf color: green
Fall color: no fall color change
Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: white

Flower characteristic: spring flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: round
Fruit length: less than .5 inch
Fruit cover: fleshy
Fruit color: red
Fruit characteristic: persists on the plant; showy

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: typically multi-trunked or clumping stems; not particularly showy; no thorns
Current year stem/twig color: gray/silver
Current year stem/twig thickness: thin

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in part shade/part sun
Soil tolerances: loam; sand; acidic; slightly alkaline; extended flooding; well-drained;
Drought tolerance: moderate

Soil salt tolerances: unknown

Plant spacing: 36 to 60 inches

Other

Roots: usually not a problem

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

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

Invasive potential: not known to be invasive

Pest resistance: no serious pests are normally seen on the plant

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.