



Cooperative Extension Service  
Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

## *Ilex decidua* 'Hunter'<sup>1</sup>

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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* 'Hunter'

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

**Common name(s):** 'Hunter' 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; small parking lot

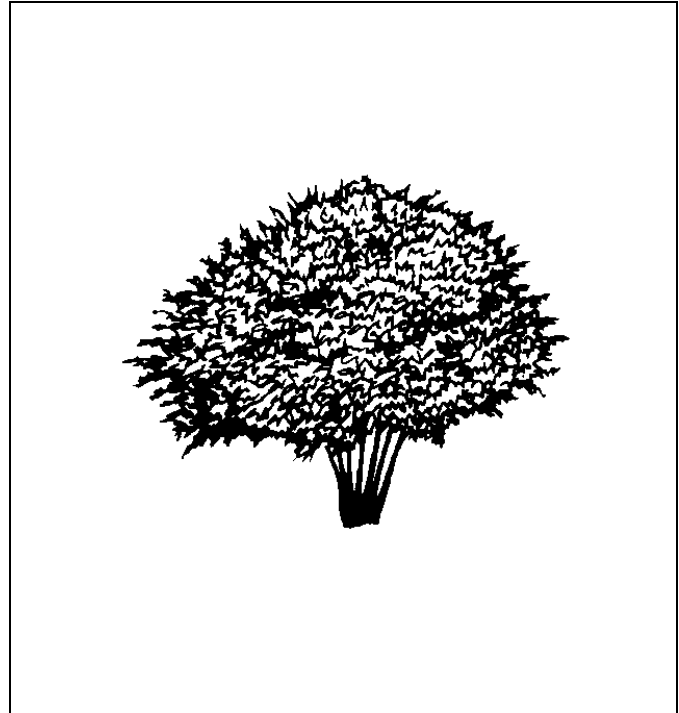


Figure 1. 'Hunter' Possumhaw.

islands (< 100 square feet in size); medium-sized parking lot islands (100-200 square feet in size); large parking lot islands (> 200 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); residential street tree

**Availability:** grown in small quantities by a small number of nurseries

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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.