

## VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

### WILDFLOWER #90 answer: AMERICAN HOLLY (*Ilex opaca*)

Small as trees go, slow-growing but tough, American holly is a gift to its natural community. Tolerant of shade, it can take root in an established understory, where its prickly leaves persist, leathery and green year round, discouraging deer. Its dark defended recesses shelter birds in winter (including even the red-cockaded woodpecker). It is at home with acidic soils, bringing diversity to pine forests as well as deciduous forests, and it thrives behind coastal dunes mere feet from the ocean. Comfortable with moisture, it grows easily near swamps and bottomlands; welcoming cold, it feeds at least 18 kinds of birds in winter—among them wild turkey, cedar waxwing, goldfinch, bobwhite, and thrushes.

Perhaps we should say “American hollies,” because this tree has a lot of variations. Most species in the genus *Ilex* have 9 or 10 chromosomes, but American holly has 36, making it variable and adaptable. There are over 1000 cultivars.

Another reason to think “hollies” is that there are male and female trees. It is easy to tell the white four-petaled flowers apart; male flowers bear four yellow stamens, and female flowers have a green “bump,” which is the ovary. Bees, wasps, ants, and night-flying moths carry pollen between them. In all, the American hollies host 30 species of insects, including the larva of Henry’s woodland elfin butterfly.

There is no doubt of a tree’s sex once fruits begin to grow in September. Green, then brilliant red, they are technically *drupes*—fruits with a thin skin, soft flesh, and a hard inner cover over seeds. They feed wildlife all winter, though a large flock of waxwings reportedly can strip a holly in minutes, sowing seeds widely in their droppings.

First nations used the berries for buttons and barter, but settlers invested American holly with legends about its European cousin. Ancient Romans called holly the female partner of male ivy, pairing them for fertility during the winter feast of Saturnalia. Druids thought holly the king of winter (oak was the king of summer), so Celtic chieftains wore it as a magic crown. Christians saw the spines and berries as Christ’s crown of thorns and blood. Think of all this next time you sing “Of all the trees that are in the wood, the holly bears the crown.”

### WILDFLOWER #91

**Clues:** This aromatic evergreen grows in dense patches.



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