‘Sparkleberry’ Holly

The winter holidays are a time when we look to nature for material for decorations. Evergreen conifers, Southern magnolia foliage, and wreaths and swags made of their greenery are the traditional elements we use. Berries, also, add impact and color to both outdoor and indoor displays. Deciduous hollies are especially striking, as their lack of leaves makes the brilliantly colored fruits more visible.

We have several native deciduous hollies in the Southeastern United States, but a fantastic winterberry holly cultivar, *Ilex* x ‘Sparkleberry,’ developed by the United States National Arboretum, has improved characteristics that resulted in its receiving a Pennsylvania Horticultural Society Gold Medal in 1987.

Plant breeder William Kosar made selections from crosses of a native deciduous holly, *Ilex verticillata*, and a species indigenous to Japan, *Ilex serrata*. Since hollies are dioecious, having male and female flowers on separate plants, a male plant must be grown within forty feet of female plants to provide enough pollen for good fruit set. So, from these crosses he selected both a male, *Ilex ‘Apollo,’* as a pollinizer, and a female seedling, *Ilex ‘Sparkleberry,’* which exhibited certain desirable features.

‘Sparkleberry’ is a multi-stemmed shrub that matures at 10-12 feet with an equal spread. It has the heavy fruit set of its imported parent combined with *Ilex verticillata’s* ability to grow in damp or wet soils. However, it does perform well in a variety of soil types, including sands or clays. The three-inch long spineless leaves are a shiny green before dropping in the fall. After leaf fall, its glossy red berries become very showy, and these fruits are held well into the spring. If you bring cut branches inside for arrangements, they last for several weeks in water.

Although berry production is greater in full sun, ‘Sparkleberry’ will produce a noticeable show if grown in part shade. A grouping at the edge of a yard or woodland area can serve as a focal point for many months during the winter when there is little other color in the landscape. At the edge of a pond or lake, a large planting of ‘Sparkleberry’ is especially striking. Make some heading cuts on older branches in the late spring to promote heavier fruit production on the resulting new growth.
‘Sparkleberry’s ability to grow in saturated or dry soils makes it an ideal choice for rain gardens where it provides structural interest throughout the year. This shrub is widely adaptable as it tolerates urban air pollution and even salt spray. Among its few problems is iron chlorosis if grown on alkaline soils. Berries on these plants seem to become more attractive to wildlife as the season progresses, and they serve as a late winter food source for birds. The relatively inconspicuous male and female flowers are attractive to certain pollinators and promote diversity in the insects attracted to your landscape.

Prepared by Amanda McNulty, Horticulture Extension Agent, Clemson University. 12/15.

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