Tea Olive

Tea olives (*Osmanthus* species) are some of the most sweetly fragrant plants in Southern gardens. Their scent makes them ideal for planting near windows and outdoor living areas where the fall blooming flowers can be readily enjoyed.

Tea olives grow as dense, evergreen shrubs or small trees. Their leaves resemble holly leaves, explaining another common name, false holly. They can be readily distinguished from hollies by their opposite leaves, hollies having alternate leaves.

![Sweetly fragrant, white flowers of Fortune’s tea olive (Osmanthus x fortunei) in October.](image)

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**Mature Height/Spread**
Height varies from 6 to 30 feet tall depending on species and cultivar. Width is similar to height. Smaller leaved cultivars of holly tea olive (*Osmanthus heterophyllus*), Fortune's tea olive (*O. x fortunei*) and Delavay tea olive (*O. delavayi*) make good hedges and can be maintained as low as 4 feet tall.

**Growth Rate**
Growth rate of tea olives is slow to moderate, approximately 4 to 12 inches per year. Growth rate is strongly influenced by soil quality and organic matter content, available nutrients and water availability.

**Ornamental Features**
Flowers of all tea olive species are intensely fragrant, often being compared to the scent of peaches, orange blossoms or jasmine. The most common flower color is creamy-white, but depending on cultivar, can vary to include pure white, pale to deep yellow, and orange. While individual flowers are small, the clusters are usually large and numerous enough to be quite showy.

Foliage is dark, leathery, and usually toothed along the edges. Growth habit of most species is dense and upright-oval to round in form.

**Landscape Use**
The dense growth habit and dark evergreen foliage of tea olives make them excellent choices for hedges, screens and individual specimen plants.

**Culture**
Most tea olives will grow in sun to medium shade. Some variegated cultivars, such as 'Goshiki', may show some leaf discoloration in full sun. Tea olives grow best in fertile, moist, well-drained, acidic soil. They are moderately drought tolerant once established. Tea olives are not salt spray tolerant, with the exception of the native Devilwood (*Osmanthus americanus*).

Tea olives rarely need pruning since they usually form a pleasing shape on their own. However, they can be pruned either selectively for shape, or small leafed types can be sheared as formal hedges. Prune most tea olives before growth starts in spring, since they flower on current season's growth. The two spring blooming species - *O. delavayi* and *O.*
Americanus - should be pruned immediately after flowering. Be aware that tea olives that are pruned back severely may take several years to come back into bloom.

Problems
Tea olives are long-lived and virtually pest free. Occasional disease and insect problems can develop, mainly under stressful conditions.

Botryosphaeria canker is most commonly associated with drought stress. Cercospora leaf spot and anthracnose are occasional problems. Phytophthora and Pythium root rots are associated with poorly drained or excessively wet soil. Soilborne nematodes can also be a problem.

Scales are the main insect pest and can be controlled with horticultural oil sprays. Do not apply summer oils when the temperature is below 45 °F or above 90 °F, or when high humidity prevents rapid drying.

Species & Cultivars
Holly Tea Olive or False Holly (Osmanthus heterophyllus): Holly tea olives are relatively small compared to other tea olives, growing between 8 and 10 feet tall and slightly narrower in width. Very old plants will occasionally reach 20 feet or more. Juvenile and adult leaf forms of holly tea olive (Osmanthus heterophyllus).

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Species are very spiny and holly-like in appearance. Adult leaves are smooth margined, with a spine only at the tip.

The flowers of this species are less visible than that of others, but are intensely fragrant, blooming between late September to early October to as late as November. Holly tea olives will grow in all regions of South Carolina. There are a number of cultivars.

- 'Goshiki' means "five colors" in Japanese. Young leaves are pinkish, maturing to mottled green, gray-green, gold and cream. This cultivar grows best in part shade.

Many colored leaves of ‘Goshiki’ holly tea olive (Osmanthus heterophyllus).
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- 'Gulftide' is a compact, upright form with very spiny, glossy leaves.
- 'Ogon' has golden yellow new leaves that fade to yellow-green. It is slow growing and best grown in part shade.
- 'Sasaba' has uniquely twisted and extremely spiny leaves and grows as an upright pyramid. The texture is interesting and attractive, but the plant should be handled with care.
- 'Variegatus' has striking dark green leaves with creamy white edges. It does not discolor in full sun. 'Variegatus' is upright, slow growing and smaller than the species.
- 'Rotundifolius' has leathery, non-spiny foliage. It has fragrant flowers and is a slow growing dwarf to 4 or 5 feet tall. Seedlings grown from this cultivar have extremely spiny leaf margins.

Holly tea olives are very dense and with leaves only 1 to 2½ inches long; they are one of the best choices for a formal hedge. Tea olives have both juvenile and adult leaf forms. The juvenile leaves on this
Fortune's Tea Olive (*Osmanthus x fortunei*): This tea olive is a hybrid between *O. heterophyllus* and *O. fragrans*. It is intermediate between those species in most traits. Fortune's tea olive grows 15 to 20 feet tall, with similar width. It has dense growth in an oval-rounded form. White, highly fragrant flowers last for several weeks from October to November. Fortune's tea olive will grow in all regions of South Carolina.

- 'Fruitlandii' flowers are pale cream-yellow and is more compact and cold hardy than *O. x fortunei*.
- 'San Jose' leaves are somewhat longer and narrower than the species, with more and longer spines.

Fragrant Tea Olive (*Osmanthus fragrans*): This is the most fragrant species of a group known as a whole for their superb scent. Fragrant tea olives can grow as tall as 20 to 30 feet near the coast, although they are usually smaller, particularly in the Piedmont. Height is more often in the 10 to 12 foot range with an 8-foot width. Plants are upright when young, but can spread into a small vase-shaped tree at maturity.

Fragrant tea olives will grow throughout South Carolina, but can suffer cold damage in the upper Piedmont or Mountains if temperatures in a very cold winter approach 0 °F or if during a warm winter the temperature drops rapidly to 20 °F.

Fragrant tea olive has an exceptionally long bloom period, often for 2 months during the fall, with scattered blooming through winter and into the spring. The flowers are showy and held in clusters along the stems. The species has small white flowers, but there are several cultivars, mostly chosen for differing flower color. While some are still uncommon, they are well worth the search.

- *O. fragrans f. aurantiacus* has light to bright orange abundant flowers in fall. Although the flowers last for only one to two weeks, this form is exceptionally heavy blooming. It is more cold hardy than the species, tolerating temperatures down to -8 °F with little damage.

- 'Conger Yellow' has butter-yellow flowers.
- 'Fudingzhu' is long flowering, with exceptionally abundant, very fragrant creamy-white flowers.
- *O. f. var. thunbergii* is similar to *O. f. f. aurantiacus*, but with light yellow flowers.

Delavay Tea Olive (*Osmanthus delavayi*): This is one of the few spring-flowering tea olives, blooming in April. Flowers are showy, profuse, white and fragrant. It grows into an arching mound 6 to 10 feet tall by 6 to 10 feet wide, but can easily be kept smaller. The leaves are smaller than those of other tea olives, only 1 inch long by ½ inch wide. They are shiny, toothed and dark green. Delavay tea olive will grow throughout South Carolina.

Devilwood (*Osmanthus americanus*): This is the only native tea olive, growing in the wild along swamp margins and streams in the Coastal Plain. It grows into a small, upright evergreen tree, 20 to 25 feet tall. Leaves are shiny, olive green, elongated, 2
to 4½ inches long, with a smooth edge. Plants accept pruning well and can be maintained as a hedge if desired.

Devilwood (Osmanthus americanus) foliage.

The flowers of devilwood are relatively small compared to other tea olives, but open very early in spring and have the typical tea olive sweet fragrance.

Devilwood will grow throughout South Carolina. It grows in either sun or part shade. Devilwood prefers moist, well-drained, acidic soil, but is adaptable to various soil types, tolerates extended flooding, and is also tolerant of salt spray.

Revised and images added by Joey Williamson, HGIC Horticulture Extension Agent, Clemson University, 12/13. Prepared by Karen Russ, HGIC Horticulture Specialist. (New 12/07.)

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