SOLUTIONS IN THE LAND

CROP PROFILE

YAUPON HOLLY

Ilex vomitoria
Member of the Aquifoliaceae family

History

Yaupon holly is native to the southeastern United States and has been used for thousands of years by Indigenous tribes as a medicinal plant and stimulating beverage. Known by names such as the Beloved Tree, Big Medicine, and Cassina, yaupon was central to ceremonial and social rituals, including the preparation of the sacred Black Drink. The plant was widely traded among tribes and valued far beyond its native range, with archaeological evidence of yaupon use as far south as Mexico. After the Boston Tea Party, yaupon was promoted as a domestic substitute for imported tea. Today, it remains culturally and historically significant as North America's only native caffeinated plant.

Climate Needs

Yaupon thrives in full sun to full shade and is tolerant of heat, drought, humidity, and occasional flooding. It is well adapted to coastal conditions, including salt spray, and is more heat-tolerant than many other evergreen hollies. Minimal supplemental watering is needed once plants are established.

Yaupon Holly Description

Yaupon holly is an upright, single- or multi-trunked evergreen shrub or small tree typically reaching 12–25 ft tall. Leaves are alternate, simple, glossy dark green, and less than 1.5 inches long, with finely rounded teeth along the margins. Bark is pale gray with light mottling. Plants are dioecious, with male and female flowers borne on separate plants. Small white flowers appear in leaf axils, and female plants produce abundant bright red drupes (commonly called berries) that persist into winter. Yaupon has an irregular branching habit and responds well to pruning, making it suitable for hedges, screens, espaliers, and topiary. At least one male plant is required for fruit production.

Soil

Yaupon tolerates a wide range of soil types, including sand and clay, but prefers acidic soils with a pH of 4.5–7.0. It has low tolerance for calcareous soils. Once established, it performs well in both dry and moist conditions.

Seeding

Yaupon can be propagated from seed, cuttings, transplants, or root suckers. Seeds are slow to germinate and require scarification and stratification to improve success. Fresh seed may be planted outdoors in pots and overwintered naturally. Softwood or semi-hardwood cuttings root readily in a peat-and-sand mix when treated with rooting hormone and kept in warm, humid conditions for 60–90 days. Root suckers and volunteer seedlings near mature plants can be transplanted successfully when the soil is moist. Keep newly planted material consistently watered to reduce transplant shock.

SOLUTIONS IN THE LAND

CROP PROFILE

Pest & Disease Managment
Yaupon has few serious pest or disease issues. Leafminers may occasionally cause cosmetic damage but rarely affect overall plant health.

Highlights

Because yaupon evolved locally over millions of years, it thrives without added irrigation, fertilizers, or pesticides. Its deep root system helps stabilize soil, store carbon, and support intact forest ecosystems, while wild harvesting maintains biodiversity and existing habitat structure.

Fertility
Yaupon has low fertility requirements and generally does not require supplemental fertilization once established. Excessive fertility may encourage weak or overly vigorous growth.

Weed Control
Weed control is most important during establishment. Mulching helps suppress weeds and conserve soil moisture around young plants.

Harvest
Leaves may be harvested year-round for tea, with peak flavor often achieved after light roasting. When harvesting yaupon, remove no more than one-third of the tree's canopy at a time to maintain plant health and vigor. Branches may be snapped off and stripped of leaves, or leaves may be harvested directly from attached branches. If branches are left intact, foliage typically regrows within about a week. There is no strict harvest location on the plant, and leaves may be collected from anywhere on the canopy. Growth slows during winter, particularly in December, and resumes in early spring around March. The optimal harvest period is late fall, especially November, when berries begin turning from green to red.

Cleaning & Storage
Harvested leaves should be air-dried or lightly roasted before storage. Store dried leaves in airtight containers in a cool, dark location to preserve flavor and caffeine content.

Risk
Yaupon holly is not invasive within its native range but may spread via seed where conditions are favorable. Female plants produce abundant fruit that can self-sow if unmanaged.

SOLUTIONS IN THE LAND

CROP PROFILE

Rating any crop's production opportunity or risk is subjective and depends on the region where the crop is to be raised. Genetic advancement for pathogen tolerance and adverse weather condition has been more significant for popular, high seed sales crops such as corn and soybeans. The below table lists some of the issues of producing specific crops and helps guide your process of selecting your cropping choice.

Average rating: 2.93

Issue	1	2	3	4	5
Seed availability				X	
Scouting requirements					X
Drought tolerance				X	
Waterlogged soil tolerance			X		
Disease pressure				X	
Wildlife concerns				X	
Yield swings				X	
Harvest ability			X		
Field loss			X		
Market demand			X		
Soil regeneration			X		
Residue value				X	
Storability				X	
Benefit for following crop			X		

1- very low 2- low 3- average 4- moderately high 5- very high

Seed availability – Price, lead time, and required lot size are consideration for these issues
Scouting requirements – What frequency does someone need to look at the crop?
Drought tolerance – Rainfall patterns are requiring crops go longer between rainfall events.
Waterlogged soil tolerance – Rainfall events tend to produce higher volumes than historical averages.
Disease pressure – Plant stress has increased with the rise of daytime temperatures
Wildlife concerns – Deer, rabbits, voles, resident geese, and others can destroy fragile crops.
Yield swings – How predictable will the income be when this crop goes to market?
Harvest ability – Do we need plans B & C if adverse conditions affect the harvest?
Field loss – How much will be left in the field and can we monetize field loss?
Market demand – Does this crop have an elastic delivery window and are there timing penalties?
Profitability – Is there potential for higher margins needed for a shrinking land base?
Soil regeneration – Does this crop support the next crop?
Residue value – What remains after the target crop? Can we monetize the residue?
Storability – How long can we hold this crop? Will quality be challenging to maintain?