

Production and Marketing of *Ilex Opaca* for the Northern Market

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Our search for the most cold hardy cultivars of *Ilex opaca* (those which could withstand -15F temperatures) took us to many midwestern and eastern nurseries, arboreta, and private gardens. We encountered over 200 named cultivars and discovered that only a handful were in commercial production in the eastern United States.

The limited commercial offerings of American holly may be attributable to the following:

- 1) Limited container adaptability.
- 2) Introduction and overwhelming acceptance of the *I. xmeserveae* hollies.
- 3) Slow growth pattern in the north (only one flush per season).

We still feel that *I. opaca* cultivars are worthy of consideration in the marketplace because of their handsome conical shape, tolerance of urban settings, soil adaptability, and deer resistance, not to mention their traditional role as a holiday plant.

The *I. opaca* cultivars we find most acceptable for Zone 5a (-15 to -20F) are the following: Arlene Leach, David Leach, Carnival, Arthur Pride, Clarissa, George E. Hart, Mary Holman, Cardinal, Emily, Christmas Carol, Pride of Butler, and Santa Claus. This is not to say that other cultivars will not survive in Zone 5. Many of the above mentioned were just coming on to the marketplace in the early 1960s when the holly market went, literally, South.

All of the aforementioned cultivars share some admirable characteristics. Large leaves, dark green in color; natural central leader; pyramidal shape with little trimming; above average fruit set; orange to carmine-red fruit color, and tolerance of extreme cold (-20F). Like all hollies in general, *I. opaca* taxa will not tolerate desiccating winter winds and need protection, either natural or artificial, to prosper.

We begin the propagation of *I. opaca* cultivars in late August and early September where we make the best use of natural heat and light. Hardwood cuttings with terminal buds (only branch ends and vertical and top growth) are taken. The length of a finished cutting is 5 to 6 inches. We may only be able to take 50 to 100 pieces per tree, hence the search for known trees continues. Cuttings are stripped to 3 to 4 leaves, double wounded, and dipped into an Hormex powder (1.6% IBA). The cuttings are stuck in a 40 tray that has been coated with Spin-outTM. This is our 1st year using Spin-outTM. A fungicide drench of Cleary 3336 is applied at this time and the trays are placed under mist.

Cuttings taken in late summer will initiate rooting in 4 to 5 weeks. At this time they are taken off mist and placed in a low heat house to finish rooting over the winter. Success rate is usually 95% to 100%.

Cuttings taken after 1 Oct. through 1 Dec. without benefit of a heavy freeze tend to have a lower/slower yield (75%) and take about 8 weeks to root.

Those taken from 1 Dec. to 1 Feb. or into full dormancy receive bottom heat at 72F with air temperature maintained at 45 to 50F. Success rates climb with this method

to over 90% and rooting time is very quick, often less than 30 days. Cuttings are ready for spring shipping after March 1. We generated 20,000 *I. opaca* cultivars cuttings last year and could have sold many more.

We try to hold back 50% of the cuttings and move them up to 2-qt Spin-Out™ containers. These are the best size and quality for the wholesale buyer because there is no loss and they can be shipped any time during the season. Those plants not potted up (approx. 20%) are placed in beds in the field. When they are 18 inches to 2 ft the bedded plants are placed in rows and left to grow on as finished stock. We now have a steady continuum of 3 ft plants available and hope to get to a good supply of 6 ft plants in the next few years.

We market our hollies through advertisements in national publications, catalogue mailings, trade shows, and the Internet. We ship nationwide with 80% to 90% of our plants going to the Eastern United States.

The problems associated with marketing and promoting hollies are primarily based on misconceptions. The image of *I. opaca* cultivars is that they grow in a limited area, they are a disease-ridden plant, and they are just too much effort for the commercial grower. In reality, hardy *I. opaca* cultivars will grow from Nova Scotia to Florida westward into Iowa and Missouri. Leaf miner is indeed a minor problem. It is a pest easily controlled with a spring application of a systemic insecticide. Once under control plants generally will stay clean and need to be sprayed only every 2 or 3 years to keep the leaf miner at bay.

Prospective buyers often call our nursery and tell us that they have had little success with hollies in the past. When quizzed, it is apparent that nonhardy *I. opaca* cultivars have been shipped into areas where they are difficult if not impossible to grow. No one had grown Pride cultivars and other hardy cultivars in years. These plants sell themselves once customers learn that they can withstand Zone 5 winters.

For the commercial grower, the time factor of 6+ years to produce a finished plant can be daunting. From my survey of the market, the growers who have finished product cannot meet the current demand, and therefore name their price.

With the advent of Spin-Out™, we may well be able to grow large container *I. opaca* cultivars, thus eliminating another market hurdle.

We hope that with our interest in hollies we can help educate and inform many others as to the merit of this remarkable plant. *Ilex opaca* cultivars do not fit into a cookie-cutter approach to plant production; they are special plants intended to be grown for their individual qualities, perhaps that is why we like them so much and think they should be produced by more growers.