

Yaupon Holly – Reprinted from Friends of Hagerman NWR Weekly Blog December 29, 2016 (by Jean Flick)

Yaupon holly
Ilex vomitoria

Larval host for Henry's Elfin Butterfly

During the gray of winter when little is blooming at Hagerman National Wildlife Refuge, the bright red berries of yaupon holly add a splash of color to the refuge landscape. Popular in north Texas yards, Yaupon is a perennial plant, grown as a shrub or small tree with evergreen, shiny leathery leaves that are 1/2 - 1 1/2 inches long. The tree usually grows no higher than 25 feet, but can grow as tall as 45 feet. Yaupon is slow growing, becoming thick and twiggy inside, a perfect cover for nesting birds (1).



You can easily see them growing at the Refuge in the Butterfly Garden, in the parking area and on the lawn adjacent to the Visitor Center.

The pale gray bark is marked with white patches. The leaves and twigs contain caffeine and can be used to produce tea. In fact, Native Americans drank large quantities of the tea ceremonially for purification that involved purging, leading to the plant species name of vomitoria. During the Civil War, yaupon tea was used by Southerners as a substitute for scarce coffee and black tea (2).



These native members of the holly family range from the southeastern coast of the U.S., west to Texas and north to southeast Oklahoma. The plants are versatile, being both cold and heat tolerant, are low in water use and can grow in moist or well drained sandy, loamy, clay, limestone, or gravelly soils (1).

In the spring, the shrub puts forth tiny, whitish flowers that may be scattered or densely clustered along the branches. Look for blooms in April and May. Yaupon fruits are drupes (often called stone fruits, meaning a fleshy fruit with a seed inside) that are shiny red and spherical, up to 1/4 inch in diameter. The female shrubs produce fruit the best when they receive at least a half day of sun or more. Many species of birds eat the fruit, typically in late winter after several freezes and thaws (1).

Yaupon are a larval source for Henry's Elfin butterflies. Henry's Elfins typically stay near their larval food source. When not taking nectar or moisture, courting, or laying eggs, they are usually hidden among the foliage (3).



References:

- (1) Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center at www.wildflower.org
- (2) www.wildedible.com
- (3) Butterfly Gardening for Texas by Geyta Ajilvsgi. Texas A&M University Press. 2013

Photo Credit: Jean Flick, Laurie Sheppard