

## Winterberry, Wintergreen, and Wintergreen

By Susan Camp

The title of today's "Gardening Corner" looks a little like the name of a well-established Victorian law firm or maybe a child's counting game. Winterberry, wintergreen, and wintergreen are actually common names of three attractive but unrelated native plants. Mistaken identities can occur if we rely on common names that may vary from region to region.

Several days ago, I read a short article on the internet from a Cooperative Extension located in another eastern state about a plant known as "winterberry," but also called "wintergreen" and "teaberry." The botanical name of the plant in the article was *Gaultheria procumbens*, which confused me because I know winterberry as *Ilex verticillata*.

Are you with me? If not, I will try to explain how common and regional names can cause confusion when you are purchasing new plants.

I will begin with *Ilex verticillata* (winterberry, common winterberry, or winterberry holly). Winterberry is a deciduous broadleaf shrub in the holly family that can grow to a height of 10 feet. It is native to eastern North America, particularly wetland areas in Zones 4 to 8. Winterberry requires partial shade to full sun and likes moist, acid soil with a high organic content.

The glossy green leaves drop in the fall, leaving the red drupes on the branches as a bright spot of color in winter. The bare branches are attractive in winter flower arrangements.

Winterberry is easy to maintain. It should be pruned in early spring, which will decrease fruit production the next year, but increase fruiting in subsequent years.

Like yaupon holly, winterberry requires a male plant for female plants to produce fruit. Many cultivars of winterberry have an open, informal habit, but compact cultivars like 'Red Sprite' have been developed. Read VCE Publication 2901-1077 "Winterberry" and Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder entry "*Ilex verticillata*" for more information.

Winterberry as I know it was not the plant in the Extension article. The writer was discussing *Gaultheria procumbens* (American or common wintergreen, teaberry or Eastern teaberry, and several other names), a member of the heath family.

The name teaberry tipped me off, because I am old enough to remember teaberry chewing gum and "The Teaberry Shuffle," a silly dance performed in 1960's commercials to promote the product. (Trivia: The music was performed by Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass.) The tasty gum had a sweet, minty flavor. Oil of wintergreen was produced from the plant's leaves.

*Gaultheria procumbens* is a broadleaf evergreen found in Eastern North American hardwood forests. Wintergreen spreads by rhizomes to form a groundcover that stands 3 to 6 inches in

height. This plant likes acidic, organically rich, well-drained soil in part to full shade. It prefers cool summers, so we probably won't see it on the Middle Peninsula.

The leathery leaves are dark green and oblong. White, bell-shaped flowers bloom from June to July. Bright red berries provide forage for wildlife throughout the winter. You can find information on *G. procumbens* in the NCState Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox and Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder entries on "*Gaultheria procumbens*."

The second plant called wintergreen is *Chimaphila maculata* (spotted or striped wintergreen, also called pipsissewa, its Native American name.) This evergreen member of the heath family grows in medium to dry sandy, acidic soils with good drainage. It thrives as a groundcover in shady, dry woodland settings. Look for striped wintergreen growing beneath your hardwoods.

Striped wintergreen spreads by rhizomes. The leathery, dark green lance-shaped leaves bear a white stripe along the midvein and are pale underneath. Two pairs of smaller leaves grow at the plant's base and three larger leaves below the flower. Clusters of nodding, pinkish-white flowers appear in late summer to early fall. The flowers give way to dark brown seed capsules in winter.

*C. maculata* may be endangered in some states. See VA Tech Dendrology entry "Striped Pipsissewa" and NCSU Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox "*Chimaphila maculata*."

Botanical names are tedious to learn, but they can help us to identify plants correctly.