



# INVASIVE PLANT PROFILE

English Holly *Ilex aquifolium*

Family: Aquifoliaceae Zone 7



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## Why is *Ilex aquifolium* a problem?

This is a hardy shrub that can withstand a variety of conditions. While it grows in most soils, it prefers sandy or gravelly loam with good drainage. It prefers shade though will tolerate sun, growing in a more compact form. Like many invasive species, it reproduces in more than one way - by seeds dispersed by birds, and by suckering and layering. Suckering is the reproduction of a plant by shoots that arise from an existing root system. Layering is when the plant grows roots where stems touch the ground. As *I. aquifolium* establishes and spreads, it can form dense thickets.

*I. aquifolium* has been used as an ornamental tree, and its cuttings used in Christmas decorations. However, now it can now be found in deciduous, mixed and coniferous forests as well as on forest edges and hedgerows. It can dominate the tall shrub layer, creating a deep shade difficult for some native species to grow in. Various sources on invasive species indicate that *I. aquifolium* competes with native plants for light, nutrients and water. *I. aquifolium* has been identified as particularly a problem in the forests of North Vancouver and on portions of Vancouver Island such as natural areas around Saanich.

See [www.leps.bc.ca/pdf/englishholly.pdf](http://www.leps.bc.ca/pdf/englishholly.pdf) for more information on *Ilex aquifolium*.

## How is *Ilex aquifolium* controlled once a site is invaded?

There are physical and manual control methods for *I. aquifolium*. These include:

- hand pulling small seedlings by the roots, frequently and when they first appear
- cutting off more mature trees at ground level
- removing flowers/fruit

It is easier to remove *I. aquifolium* by hand when the plant is young and growing in moist soil. Seeds are viable or can germinate even after they have been cut off the shrub. When removing or cutting *I. aquifolium*, place plant material on tarps and remove them from the site. Make sure that seeds are bagged and disposed of with refuse. Do not compost the seeds. Cutting mature trees is hard work, but can be effective if the seeds are properly removed. The site, and cut stumps, require frequent monitoring for plant re-growth.

## Local government response

A number of local and provincial governments are responding to the need to control, contain, and find alternative plants to *I. aquifolium*. While the City of North Vancouver and District of Saanich are encouraging members of the public to get involved in removal efforts, the BC Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks created an invasive plant management plan for the Sea-to-Sky Improvement Project that also warned against the use of *I. aquifolium*.

Of the thousands of plants imported into Canada from abroad, only a smaller percentage become invasive – 3% - 7%. Unfortunately, *I. aquifolium* is amongst this small group of plants posing a problem in the Lower Mainland.



## Plant description

Originally from Eurasia and northern Africa, *I. aquifolium* is a large, evergreen shrub that grows to the height of a small tree, up to 13m tall. It produces small white flowers, pollinated by bees, and bunches of bright red berries on female trees. The berries are eaten by birds. *I. aquifolium* leaves are thick, tough, dark green, and glossy. They are also very spiky, and are alternate on the stem. The bark is green on young plants, smooth and grey on mature plants.

# Market Alternatives

There are other shrubs that offer similar benefits to *Ilex aquifolium* such as evergreen interest all winter, bright berries and green foliage for Christmas decorations, and bird habitat, without becoming invasive and a threat to local ecosystems.

- 1 **Skimmia** *Skimmia japonica* This evergreen shrub provides clusters of red berries throughout winter, making it a good alternative to *I. aquifolium* for Christmas decorations. Fragrant, white flower clusters precede the berries. Both male and female shrubs are required for berry production. Suitable for shady spots in small gardens or large commercial plantings.

PART SHADE, MOIST, 1-2M TALL AND WIDE



- 2 **Oregon grape** *Mahonia aquifolium* This native evergreen shrub has similar leaves to *I. aquifolium*. A yellow spray of flowers in spring are followed by blue berries in late summer. It grows in light to deep shade and is a very low maintenance native plant for coastal gardens. Suitable for under trees, woodland planting, restoration and dry slopes.

NATIVE SPECIES, SUN/SHADE, DRY/MOIST, 1-3M TALL X 0.5-1M WIDE



- 3 **Strawberry tree** *Arbutus unedo* This tall evergreen shrub or small tree is related to our native Arbutus tree. It produces white bell shaped flowers in summer followed by orange berries that resemble strawberries. As an evergreen, this plant will provide year round interest. Suitable for large pots, as a specimen, informal hedge or as a background plant.

SUN, DRY, 4-5M TALL X 2-3M WIDE



- 4 **Mountain ash** *Sorbus sitchensis* A small native deciduous tree with winter berries that also provide food for birds. White flowers are followed by clusters of bright orange/red berries in the winter and fine leaves provide a nice texture for any ornamental garden. This tree is easily mistaken for the potentially invasive *Sorbus aucuparia* which has completely serrated leaves. *S. sitchensis* leaves are serrated on the top half of the leaf. Suitable as a small tree for residential sites, commercial plantings or restoration.

NATIVE SPECIES, SUN/SHADE, DRY/MOIST, 3-5M TALL



- 5 **Silk tassel bush** *Garrya elliptica* This evergreen shrub is a good choice for winter interest. The long yellow flower bracts bloom in late winter and still provide interest when dried, right into the summer. Suggested for large gardens as a background shrub or specimen.

SUN/PARTIAL SHADE, DRY/MOIST, 4-5M TALL X 2-3M WIDE



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