



Holly Leaf Cherry

Scientific Name: *Prunus ilicifolia*

Recommended Varieties:

There are two recognized subspecies; *ilicifolia* and *ssp. lyonii* (commonly known as Catalina Island Cherry) which is native to the Channel Islands.

Common Pest(s):

Holly leaf cherry can suffer light damage from caterpillars and white flies. It is resistant to oak root fungus.

Calscape.org
Plants.usda.gov

Photos: Creative Commons

Growing Information

Native Habitat

This evergreen shrub or small tree is native to California and is also found just outside the state's borders. Holly Leaf Cherry grows comfortably in chaparral, desert and woodland biomes.

Ideal Planting Window

Plant in fall, so that this drought tolerant shrub can develop a root system before the heat of summer. It is tolerant of a variety of soils but does best in well-draining soil. Grows in full sun, or part shade.

Growing Guidance

Once established, Holly Leaf Cherry usually only needed only monthly irrigation.

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Interesting Facts

The holly leaf cherry (*Prunus ilicifolia*) is an evergreen native that has leaves like holly, but really is a cherry (the cherries that we relish in pies, desserts and jams belong to the same genus, *Prunus*. Sweet cherries are *Prunus cerasus*; sour cherries are *Prunus avium*. And both of these are deciduous, not evergreen.) But before you get too excited about making a pie out of these luscious-looking cherries, there are some things you should know about them.

Bite into one and you will find that the sweet-tasting pulp, unlike our commercial cherries, is little more than a thin coating around a large, hard pit. Sweetness rapidly gives way to the bitterness of the pit, due to the presence of hydrocyanic acid in the pit. Nonetheless, the indigenous people of California found a way to use *Prunus ilicifolia*, commonly called “slay” or “islay”, as a popular and versatile food. They were more interested in the pit than in the pulp, and for some tribes the kernels inside the pits were second only to acorns in importance. But first, the highly toxic hydrocyanic acid had to be removed from the pit.

Granadanativegarden.org

Contact Information



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Native Habitat Description

Holly leaf cherry is an excellent tree for encouraging wildlife into the garden. The flowers attract bees. The fruits are relished by many bird species and the seeds are consumed by small mammals. This plant also supports a variety of butterflies and moths. Holly leaf cherry is an important browse species for bighorn sheep and California mule deer. This is because it is still available long into the dry California summers when most other browse items are gone.

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Historical Uses

The holly leaf cherry was the most coveted species within the *Prunus* genus. They collected the ripe fruit from this plant then fermented the fruit into an alcoholic beverage.

The Cahuilla prepared an atole from the holly leaf cherry. The inside of the seed, the kernel was first extracted and crushed in a mortar, the powder was then leached to remove the harmful chemicals. The remains were boiled into an atole. This meal was considered a prized food source, a great delicacy.

The Luiseano people used the fruit kernel to make a porridge type food. They dried the kernels in the sun then cooked the mush in an earthen pot.

The Kumeyaay people of the San Diego areas were also fond of the holly leaf cherry. They collected the shiny leaves to use as a cough medicine and ate the ripe fruits right off the shrub. They also soaked and roasted the inner seed to create a powder meal. This meal was shaped into patties then roasted on charcoals.

The wood from this holly was durable and made a good source for bow-making.

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