



FACT SHEET #CMN001 - Yaupon Holly (*Ilex vomitoria*)

Yaupon Holly is a native evergreen shrub found in the southeastern United States. For the Mvskoke Nation, Yaupon holds significant ceremonial, medicinal, and social value. It is the only native North American plant that naturally contains caffeine.

Scientific Name:

- *Ilex vomitoria* was named by Scottish botanist William Aiton in 1789. The term *vomitoria* was mistakenly given due to early European observations of Indigenous purification ceremonies involving Yaupon tea, incorrectly assuming it caused vomiting. In reality, Yaupon has no emetic properties.
- Alternative names include *Ilex floridana* and *Ilex caroliniana* in early botanical records, though *Ilex vomitoria* remains the accepted scientific name.

Ceremonial Use:

- Known as "Black Drink," Yaupon tea was consumed during significant tribal events, including treaties, battles, and sporting events. The Muscogee term *vsse loboche* (*Assi-luputski*) translates as "little leaf" but was used in various purification rituals.
- "White Drink" ceremonies promoted peace and hospitality, similar to traditional Matcha ceremonies in Asia.

Medicinal Use:

- Mvskoke people referred to Yaupon as "Big Medicine."
- It was used to calm nerves, regulate menstrual cycles, and as a salve for wounds.
- Yaupon leaves were also smoked for spiritual and calming purposes.

Trade and Expansion:

- Yaupon was traded widely throughout the Southeast, reaching as far north as Minnesota and south to the Mayans.
- European settlers adopted Yaupon as "Carolina Tea," "South Seas Tea," and "Chocolate de Indio."

Key Compounds in Yaupon:

- Caffeine: A natural stimulant, enhancing alertness and focus.
- Theophylline & Theacrine: Known for stimulating properties that improve mental clarity and reduce fatigue.
- Dicafeoylquinic Acid: Present in significantly higher amounts than green tea, offering powerful antioxidant properties.
- Flavonoids like Quercetin and Kaempferol: Known for their anti-inflammatory and immune-boosting properties.



Health Benefits:

- Acts as an antioxidant, supporting cellular health.
- May help regulate blood sugar and improve cardiovascular health.
- Yaupon tea is low in tannins, reducing bitterness compared to traditional black tea.

Tea and Beverages:

- Yaupon is increasingly popular in tea shops and wellness stores as a sustainable, local alternative to imported teas.
- Kombucha makers and beverage artisans are now using Yaupon as a caffeine source.

Agricultural Potential:

- Research supports cultivating Yaupon as a viable crop, with USDA-SBIR grants funding studies on optimal growth conditions and sustainable harvesting.
- Yaupon is drought-resistant, thrives in sandy soils, and requires minimal intervention to grow successfully.
- Yaupon varieties are commonly used in ornamental landscaping. Dwarf varieties have been bred for landscaping purposes.
- Rising cost of imported coffee has many agribusinesses looking at Yaupon as a real alternative for caffeine and as a mainstream social beverage.

Identifying Characteristics:

- Small, dark green leaves.
- Serrated leaf margins. (Other holly plants have smooth margins, or sharp, pointy margins)
- Small, red berries – only on female Yaupons.

Mvskoke Gardening Series – Yaupon Holly <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czAZOTPgnjQ>

For more information on Yaupon Holly's role in Muscogee traditions and modern uses, contact the College of the Muscogee Nation Extension Program.

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Image 1: Yaupon Holly – Notice the serrated edges of the leaf which is a key characteristic.



Image 2: Yaupon Holly – Notice the red berries that are indicative of a female plant.