

American Holly

Ilex opaca

Description

American holly is an evergreen shrub or small tree that grows to 50 feet (15 meters) in height. It can be easily recognized in any season by its alternately arranged, thickish, evergreen leaves that have a sharp spine at the tip and additional spines along the margin. The flowers, appearing in May and June, are unisexual, so that the familiar berry-like fruit, red at maturity, can be found only on female plants.

Distribution & Habitat

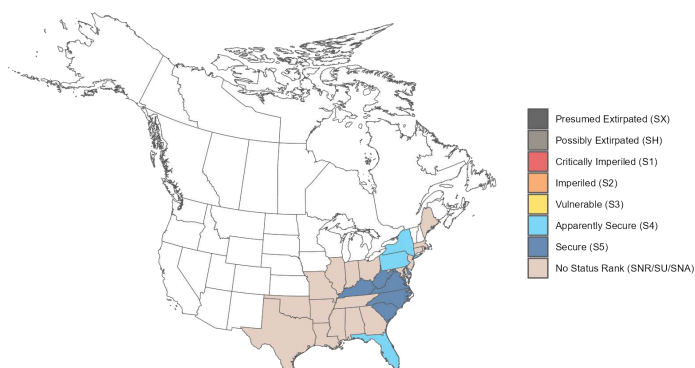
American holly has a distribution from coastal New England south and west into Florida and Texas. In Pennsylvania, it is near the northern end of its range, and occurs mostly in the southeastern counties. The species grows on wooded slopes and streambanks. It has also been grown as an ornamental, particularly in the southeastern counties, and may escape locally to woodlots, thickets, and fencerows.



Photo source: John Kunsman (PNHP)

North American State/Province Conservation Status

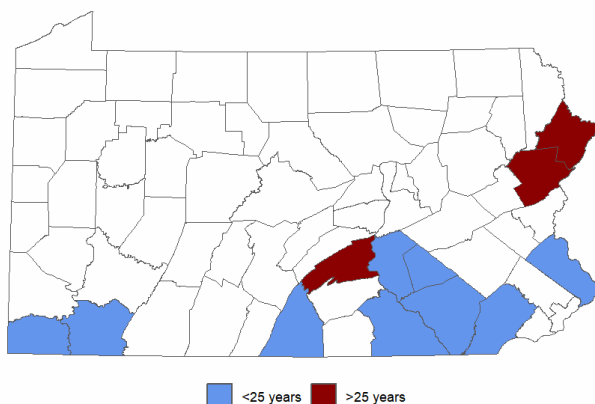
Map by NatureServe 2025



Current State Status

The PA Biological Survey (PABS) considers American holly to be a species of special concern, based on the relatively few native occurrences that have been recently confirmed. The species has a PA legal rarity status of Threatened.

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Conservation Considerations

The conservation of American holly in Pennsylvania has concentrated on protecting populations that are believed to be indigenous and that represent native genotypes.

Occurrences of the species that have resulted from escapes from plantings are of uncertain genetic origin and are considered to be of much lower conservation significance.

As a woodland species, proper forest management and control of invasive species are important for the long term viability of American holly. Gathering of the branches of wild trees for winter decoration should be discouraged.

NatureServe conservation status ranks

G5 – Globally secure; **S4S5** – Apparently secure in Pennsylvania

References

- NatureServe. 2025. NatureServe Explorer [web application] NatureServe, Arlington, Virginia. Available at <https://explorer.natureserve.org> (Accessed: May 8, 2025)
- Rhoads, A.F. and T.A. Block. 2007. The Plants of Pennsylvania: An Illustrated Manual. 2nd edition. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.