

Christmas-berry

Schinus terebinthifolia Raddi

Cashew family (Anacardiaceae)

Post-Cook introduction

This attractive introduced ornamental shrub or small tree has become widely naturalized and is a weed. It has pinnate leaves with narrowly winged axis and five, seven, or nine shiny leaflets, clusters of small white flowers, and many bright red poisonous fruits $\frac{3}{16}$ inch (5 mm) in diameter. The aromatic resinous sap produces a rash or dermatitis in some persons.

Evergreen shrub or small tree to 25 ft (7.6 m) high, with trunk 8 inches (0.2 m) in diameter, often gnarled. Bark gray, smooth or becoming furrowed into long narrow flat ridges. Twigs light brown, finely hairy when young, with many raised dots (lenticels). Sap aromatic, resinous, suggesting turpentine, turning blackish upon exposure.

Leaves alternate pinnate, 3–6 inches (7.5–15 cm) long, with narrowly winged green finely hairy axis of 1–3 inches (2.5–7.5 cm) and mostly 5, 7, or 9 (3–13 or more in varieties) stalkless leaflets paired except at end. Leaflets elliptical or oblong, 1–2 inches (2.5–5 cm) long and $\frac{1}{2}$ – $\frac{3}{4}$ inch (1.3–2 cm) wide, the largest at end to 3 inches (7.5 cm) by 1 inch (2.5 cm), short-pointed at both ends, often with inconspicuous small blunt teeth toward apex, slightly thickened, hairless or nearly so, upper surface shiny green with several straight side veins, and lower surface dull light green.

Flower clusters (panicles) mostly at base of upper leaves, 1–4 inches (2.5–10 cm) long, much branched, composed of many short-stalked flowers, partly male and female on different plants (dioecious). Flower about $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (3 mm) long and broad consists of calyx of five tiny pointed green sepals; corolla of five spreading white petals less than $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (3 mm) long; 10 stamens attached at base of large ring-shaped disk; and pistil with rounded ovary, short style, and dot stigma.

Fruits (drupes) many in dense clusters, bright red, with calyx at base and dot stigma at apex, with aromatic resinous brown pulp, slightly bitter. Seed single, elliptical, light brown, less than $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (3 mm) long. Female plants produce abundant fruits which mature mostly in autumn and remain attached until December.

The hard, heavy, reddish brown wood is utilized in Hawaii only as firewood and chipped mulch from trees cut during land clearing.

Fruiting branches are picked for making Christmas wreaths and decorations. Classed as a honey plant.

Christmas-berry was introduced into Hawaii before 1911 as an ornamental. Later, it was planted extensively through the islands for the bright red berries and shiny evergreen foliage used in Christmas decorations. It has escaped widely in dry lowlands and now is classed as an undesirable weed. It is very common in Ka'u and North Kona on Hawaii, southeastern Maui, and on Oahu near Mokuleia.

Special areas

Waimea Arboretum, Foster, Tantalus, Haleakala, City, Volcanoes

Champion

Height 39 ft (11.9 m), c.b.h. 12.5 ft (3.8 m), spread 46 ft (14.0 m). Waimea Village, S. Kohala, Hawaii (1968).

Spreading rapidly as a weed in southern Florida and known there as "Florida-holly." Planted also as an ornamental in southern California, southern Arizona, Puerto Rico, and Virgin Islands.

Range

Native of southern Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina. Introduced northward to southern border of continental United States and in Old World tropics.

Other common names

Christmas-berry tree, wilelaiki, nani-o-Hilo (Hawaii); Brazil peppertree (continental United States); pimienta de Brazil (Puerto Rico)

The Hawaiian name wilelaiki, according to Neal, refers to Willie Rice, a politician, who often wore a hat lei of the berries.

Some people are sensitive to the resinous sap, which produces a rash or dermatitis. Pollen may cause sneezing and headaches, and the fruits are poisonous.



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Flowering dtwig (above), fruiting twig (below), 1 X (P.R. v. 2).