

## HOLLYLEAF CHERRY

*Prunus ilicifolia* (Nutt. ex  
Hook. & Arn.) D. Dietr.

Plant Symbol = PRIL

Contributed by: USDA NRCS National Plant Data  
Center



Brother Alfred Brousseau  
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### Alternate Names

Islay, yslay, evergreen cherry

**Warning:** Hollyleaf cherry pits may be toxic when taken internally, without sufficient preparation.

### Uses

The name *islay*, or *yslay* is the Spanish version of the Salinan Native American name, “*slay*”, and is the common name historically used by most Native Californian peoples to refer to the plant, the fruit, and the food made from the pits of *Prunus ilicifolia* (Harrington 1944). Don Pedro Fages, in his account of the Gaspar de Portolá expedition from Spain in 1770, writes of the “good tamales” made from islay by the Salinan people (Fages 1937). Hartweg (1848), in his report to the London Horticultural Society, remarks about the abundance of islay in the Santa Lucia Mountains and reports, “the kernel, after being roasted and made into gruel, is a favourite dish amongst the [Salinan].”

The fruits were eaten both fresh and dried. The thin, sweet flesh was eaten sparingly as it was purported to

upset the stomach if too much is consumed. The thin pulp was welcome moisture for thirsty hunters. The juice from the fruits was fermented and drunk. The kernels within the large pits were particularly valued for food by many Native Californians. In the past, for some tribes, the kernels within these wild cherry pits were second only to acorns in importance. The fruit was usually hand picked from the trees. The fruits that were not consumed fresh were allowed to rot or sometimes placed in warm water in order to facilitate removal of pit. The pits were then rubbed to remove any remaining pulp and skin before being spread out in the sun to dry. When dry, the pits were cracked with a stone and the kernels removed. The kernels contain hydrocyanic acid, a bitter tasting poisonous compound, which was removed by a leaching process prior to cooking. The kernels, either left whole or pounded into a meal, were then leached in several changes of cold or warm water. The ground meal was used as a base for soup and made into tortilla or tamale-like foods. The whole kernels reportedly took several hours to cook. Sometimes the kernels were roasted overnight in a grass-lined pit (Bocek 1984). After cooking the kernels were mashed and made into cakes or balls. The finished cakes were served with meat or dipped into pinole. For an in-depth discussion of what is recorded about the differing preparations of islay by several Native Californian groups, see Timbrook (1982). Prepared islay was considered a delicacy that was used for ceremonial offerings as well as offered as a welcoming gift for visitors.

The Diegueño and the Cahuilla are among the tribes that treated colds and coughs with infusions made from hollyleaf cherry bark and roots (Almstedt 1977, Romero 1954). During the spring and summer, while the sap of the tree was running the infusion was made from the bark. During the winter, while the tree was dormant, the roots were used for the infusion. The Costanoan used the wood to make bows (Bocek 1984). The Tipai people of Baja California are among the few tribes that still gather islay today.

**Livestock:** The pits of hollyleaf cherry are poisonous to most livestock. The leaves can also contain varying concentrations of hydrocyanic acid, which is poisonous to livestock.

**Wildlife:** Hollyleaf 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. These birds and animals also help to disperse the seeds away from the parent plant. In addition, many bird and animal species use the plants for cover as well as nesting places. Hollyleaf cherry is an important browse species for bighorn sheep and California mule deer (McMurray 1990). This is because it is still available long into the dry California summers when most other browse items are gone.

*Other:* Hollyleaf cherry is useful to control erosion and has been planted on steep, hillsides that are susceptible to erosion (McMurray 1990). Hollyleaf cherry has been used to make holiday wreaths and decorations, especially in combination with the red-berried branches of toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*), another native California plant that occurs in the same plant community.

#### **Status**

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

#### **Description**

*General:* Rose family (Rosaceae). Hollyleaf cherry is a small, evergreen shrub or tree that is native to California. The plants can reach 6 to 9 meters and are usually as broad as they are tall. The bark is dark gray and smooth. The twigs are grayish to reddish brown. The many branches bear glossy dark green leaves that are lighter green beneath. The leaves resemble holly leaves with serrated edges and tiny spines. Leaves are 16 to 120 mm in length and alternately arranged. Feathery blooms of flowers appear from March to May. The white flowers grow on a raceme of several flowers with petals from 1 to 3 mm long. The stems of the individual flowers vary from 1 to 5 mm long. The red to bluish-black cherry fruits ripen in September or October and are 12 to 25mm in diameter. A thin layer of sweet, fleshy pulp overlays a large smooth pit.

*Distribution:* Hollyleaf cherry is native to western California. It occurs in the mountains of the Coast Range from Napa County in the north to Baja in the south. The subspecies *lyonni*, is a tree to 15m whose native range is restricted to the Channel Islands off the coast of southern California.

For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site.

*Habitat:* These trees and shrubs grow in the moister areas of dry chaparral shrublands and foothill woodlands at elevations below 1600 meters. They are often found in canyons and on north-facing slopes.

#### **Adaptation**

Hollyleaf cherry is adapted to fire and survives by resprouting from the root crown.

#### **Establishment**

Hollyleaf cherry grows best in full sun or part shade in an area with moderate moisture and coarse soil with good drainage. The plants do not tolerate prolonged freezing. In the best of conditions, the plants can reach up to 9 meters in height and make lovely specimens. They are used as backgrounds and in screen plantings and ornamental hedges. Hollyleaf cherry is easy to grow from seed and indeed, once the plant has established and reached the fruiting stage (about 2 to 3 years), the gardener will be provided with numerous volunteers. Seeds are best sown directly into the ground, but they may be grown in gallon cans for transplanting later. Use only fresh seed as the seeds do not store well and are reported to be viable for less than 9 months. Plant several seeds in the prepared seedbed or gallon can. The seeds should sprout within 20 to 40 days. After sprouting, select one healthy seedling and remove the others by snipping them off with scissors so as not to disturb the roots. Set container grown plants out once they have reached about 30 cm. Do not leave the plants in cans longer as the roots will become coiled and not be able to develop correctly. The seeds and seedlings may need to be protected from rodents and other small mammals that will dig up the seeds and browse on the seedlings. Water the plants regularly after planting and during the first season of establishment.

#### **Management**

Hollyleaf cherry does not require pruning unless it is serving as a short hedge. In this case, it may be pruned once or twice per year. The plants are neat all round and require very little care beyond an occasional summer irrigation.

#### **Pests and Potential Problems**

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

#### **Cultivars, Improved, and Selected Materials (and area of origin)**

Hollyleaf cherry is readily available from native plant nurseries. It may also be obtained at California

Native Plant Society plant sales. Contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (formerly Soil Conservation Service) office for more information. Look in the phone book under "United States Government." The Natural Resources Conservation Service will be listed under the subheading "Department of Agriculture."

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