

A Diversity of Hollies

Polly Hill

Decades of work on Martha's Vineyard have yielded valuable insights into the hardiness of hollies—and numerous new cultivars as well

Hollies (*Ilex* spp.) have long been popular. During the festive Christmas season their bright berries and shiny, prickly leaves are enjoyed widely. But most people are unaware of the great—and increasing—diversity of hollies available for a variety of landscape situations.

The beauty of hollies deserves more than passing admiration. In fact, when one becomes aware of their varied charms, holly collecting can become an addiction. Their flowers, mostly white, are small, inconspicuous, and sweetly scented in May, when most species come into flower. Their leaves have an unlimited variety. Some hollies have spiny, others have spineless, leaves, while still others have both spiny and spineless leaves. The leaves may be long and slender, short and fat, thin or leathery, round, elliptic, serrated or entire, quilted or smooth. Their fruits, borne only by female plants, may be red, orange, yellow, black, or greenish white to pinkish white. Many species of holly are beautiful for their branching, which can be layered, upright, pendant, or twiggy.

The hollies I know and will des-

cribe grow at "Barnard's Inn Farm," our summer home on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, an island situated in the Atlantic Ocean, south of Cape Cod. A few of the hollies are native to the Vineyard and the adjacent coastal mainland, but others hail from Europe or Asia. Only those hardy in Zone 6 can adapt and mature, but my collection has grown in the last twenty-five years, until now there are upwards of one hundred thirty taxa.

The soils on Martha's Vineyard are strongly acid, nutritionally poor, dry, and sandy. The hollies endure gales and temperatures as low as -10 F in winter and dry soils in summer. Greatly in their favor are the humid sea air and the perfect soil drainage.

Ilex opaca

To the average Easterner, the word "holly" suggests *Ilex opaca* Aiton, a tree native from eastern Massachusetts to Florida and west to Missouri and Texas. It grows wild in Delaware and Maryland near our home. In the 1930s the Farmers Market in downtown Wilmington provided us with sprays for Christmas and a hand-made wreath for our front door, clusters of live berries decorating the wreath. Now, in the 1980s, one can spot holly trees along the highway, but the large

Flowering and Fruiting Branches, Flowers, and Fruits of Ilex opaca Aiton. Drawing by Charles E. Faxon. Originally published in Charles Sprague Sargent's *Silva of North America* (Volume 1, 1891).

females are gone, and only an occasional male will be left undisturbed; both the holly wreath and the Farmers Market are of the past—spent.

At Barnard's Inn Farm, I have observed that hollies have strong healing powers when damaged. For example, a six- to ten-inch- (15- to 25-cm-) wide band of bark that had been eaten by baby mice from the trunk of a four- to five-inch- (10- to 13-cm-) diameter *Ilex opaca* tree recovered after I heaped damp oak leaves high around the base of the trunk, and kept them damp. Tiny points of new bark emerged here and there, until the whole was renewed. (To discourage a

repetition, we built a barn owl nest in our big barn; mice, voles, and baby rabbits are now kept in check most satisfactorily.)

Cultivars of *Ilex opaca*. All the wild plants I have seen on Martha's Vineyard have had very small berries. To obtain garden-worthy subjects, I brought any F_1 or F_2 seedlings that had self-sowed in my Delaware garden to the Barnard's Inn Farm nursery for trial. The first selection, made in 1960, was named 'Martha's Vineyard'. It has a formal growth habit, making a tight cone, is as glossy as a member of the species can be glossy, and has very large, bright-red fruit. It is hardy and fast-growing, with a strong central leader. Good reports of the clone's hardiness have reached me from farther north and farther inland.

'Barnard Luce' is named for a descendant of an early settler of Martha's Vineyard, Henry Luce, and the last one of the name to live (about a century ago) at Barnard's Inn Farm. Like 'Martha's Vineyard', 'Barnard Luce' is a hardy, glossy "opaca," in this case from Maryland. It is more open and informal in habit than 'Martha's Vineyard' and shows off its bright-red fruits on long peduncles, resulting in a highly visible display. My several trees come from cuttings taken from a tree I discovered on Maryland's Eastern Shore, near Barber. It was a female, especially selected for its high gloss.

Ilex opaca 'Nelson West' is a narrow-leaf male selection whose cuttings were taken from a tree in shady woods near New Lisbon, New Jersey. It is registered, and, though found in 1961, the rooted cuttings have only grown to twelve- or fifteen-foot (3.5- or 4.5-m) trees. This wild plant is lacy, dainty, and graceful in



Close-up of the Fruit and Leaves of *Ilex opaca* Aiton, a Species Native to the East Coast of the United States. Photograph (taken in 1899 by Alfred Rehder) from the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum.

appearance. Narrow-leaf forms with airy habit are seldom seen in *Ilex opaca*.

A new selection, 'Villanova', registered in 1984, has yellow berries. This was a lucky find nurtured from a tiny volunteer by my brother, Howard Butcher III, at his home in Villanova, Pennsylvania. The shiny leaf is exceptionally broad, almost round. The berry is distinguished by its rich, deep-yellow color and its spherical shape. The plant is being tested at Barnard's Inn Farm.

I raise only a few of the many other named cultivars in existence. Of those few, I rate highest 'Jersey Knight', a splendid male; 'Xanthocarpa', a yellow-fruited tree from Longwood Gardens; and 'Miss Helen', a beautiful selection from McClean's Nursery in Baltimore. I am raising about fifteen other cultivars—"old timers" and newly registered plants—which I will evaluate once they have grown a while longer.

Ilex opaca, after experiencing the series of hurricanes that assaulted the East Coast from the 1930s through the 1950s, was rated second in salt and wind tolerance; *Pinus thunbergii*, the Japanese black pine, was, not surprisingly, rated first. Now, thirty or more years later, *Pinus thunbergii* is out of favor for planting anywhere because the pine bark beetle has been killing it by the hundreds. (Fifty years used to be considered the pine's normal life span, depressingly brief for people who love and want to pass on trees to posterity.) *Ilex opaca* has thus become the first choice among broad-leaved evergreens for permanent seaside plantings.

An extraordinary grove of *Ilex opaca* growing only one hundred fifty yards (135 m) from the northern shore of Martha's Vineyard illustrates the species's

tolerance to coastal conditions. A low meadow lies behind the beach, and there the old, gnarled trunks of the hollies rise vertically—branchless for about eight feet (2.5 m)—then, making a right-angled bend, horizontally, away from the wind and water. At the tips of these branches one can find a few holly leaves to prove that they are alive and growing. The grove's origin is obscure, but it appears to be spontaneous. Elsewhere on the Vineyard, in a spot of woods sheltered from high winds, there is a wild tree forty feet (12.5 m) in height.

Ilex aquifolium

Nowadays, sprays of the common holly of Britain (*Ilex aquifolium* Linnaeus) arrive on the East Coast in boxes airmailed from the West Coast, where they are raised in the splendid nurseries of Washington and Oregon. The leaves may be variegated or all green; in either case the berries are red and large—larger than those of *Ilex opaca*. Zone 6 is too cold for many cultivars of *Ilex aquifolium*, but I planted the seeds from an English holly wreath from Brownell's Holly Farms in 1970 and now, fifteen years later, I have three mature trees flowering in an open field; with great luck, two are female and one male. It has taken nearly as long to bring to flower well rooted plants of 'Cottage Queen' and 'Robert Brown' growing in two-gallon containers. Since 1972 they have grown only to about four feet (1.2 m) in height but are at last flowering in a fully established site.

A few highly rated, named cultivars of *Ilex aquifolium* are growing at Barnard's Inn Farm. 'Evangeline' is one of some fifty seedlings imported from

England at the turn of the century to ornament a waterfront estate in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. My plant, grown from a 1962 cutting of the original tree and now twelve feet (3.7 m) tall and six feet (1.85 m) wide, grows in full sun, its lower branches, only, receiving moderate shelter from the wind. As a young plant it received some protection towards the northeast from a picket fence. 'Evangeline' produces spectacular fruits that turn first yellow, then orange, and finally a showy orange-red. Its exceptionally long and wide, tropical-looking leaves seem out of place in coastal New England.



A Variant Form of *Ilex aquifolium*, Linnæus, the Common Holly of Britain. Photograph from the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum.

'Balkans' was given to me in 1972 by the late Dr. Henry T. Skinner when he was director of the United States National Arboretum. Dr. Skinner described it to me as a plant known for its superior cold-hardiness. It now measures only forty inches (1 m) by thirty inches (76 cm) after thirteen years of growth in an open field, but it seems firmly established.

'Tremough' is a clone that came from England about 1900. A plant of it came to me from the National Arboretum in a four-inch pot. Measuring two feet (0.6 m) by three feet (0.9 m), it is destined to reach eighteen feet (5.5 m) and to become broadly conical.

The cultivar 'Ciliata Major', the gift of M. M. Brubaker of Pennsylvania, rooted and was planted out in a small pot in 1965. It is now a massive cone about fifteen feet (4.5 m) high and ten feet (3 m) across. The first flowers, which appeared in 1981, proved to be male. The healthy rich, glossy, and elegant habit is splendid all year round. 'Ciliata Major' is a conspicuous landscape subject.

I may be able to upgrade the other clones of *Ilex aquifolium*, which I have rated "B" and "C" at this point, when they become better adapted.

Ilex crenata

Of the sixteen evergreen species I now am raising, *Ilex crenata* Thunberg, from Japan, is one of the most successful. The two coin-leaf selections of the nummularia group, 'Nakada' (male) and 'Mariesii' (female), are appealing, slow-growing shrubs suited to intimate plantings. 'Green Dragon' (male) and 'Dwarf Pagoda' (female), also of the nummularia group, are eye-catching and enchanting.

Dr. Tsuneshige Rokujo of Tokyo sent me seeds of *Ilex crenata* 'Convexa', from whose progeny I selected and named the cultivar 'Muffin'. Planted in 1965, it was registered in 1977. 'Muffin' is a dwarf male plant that was first observed in flower in 1978. It has the same landscape niche as the dwarf 'Helleri', but it has proved to be hardier than 'Helleri' in my conditions, and it has a finer leaf and twiggy habit than 'Helleri'.

A plant with pale-yellow berries and a spreading habit is *Ilex crenata* 'Watanabeanum'. 'Paludosa' is another low spreader from the National Arboretum. Both have small leaves and a twiggy habit, reaching greater width than height. The cultivar 'Piccolo' is a tight, round "bun," charming by itself or in small clusters. It has been gratifying that mice, rabbits, and deer so far do not eat these low, easily accessible "crenata" cultivars.

Of the many available larger forms, I have been attracted to 'Excelsa' and 'Compacta', among others, when their healthy vigor and easy culture recommend their use.

The species *Ilex mutchagara* Makino could very easily be mistaken for *Ilex crenata*, but in my specimens the leaves are larger and the fruits both shinier and larger than those of *Ilex crenata*. An upright-growing plant, it is hardy and useful in the landscape.

Ilex pedunculosa

Picture a bright-red pea hanging on a one- or two-inch (2.5- to 5- cm) thread, draped over a shining, unspined leaf two to three inches (5 to 8 cm) long. Then picture many of these on a graceful, upright tree

that can grow to fifteen feet (4.5 m). This is *Ilex pedunculosa* Miquel, the long-stalked holly from Japan. The growth pattern of its branches is more open and less twiggy than those of some other evergreen hollies. The different clones vary in hardiness, but given the right clone, *Ilex pedunculosa* is a tree for every small or large garden. I find it charming at all seasons. Like other hollies it can easily be pruned to make it fuller.

Ilex rugosa

Another species from Japan is *Ilex rugosa* Schmidt. It is seldom seen in gardens, but I have found it completely hardy at Barnard's Inn Farm. It is prostrate and does not grow fast, but the branches spread out widely, fountainlike, almost weeping. The veining of the wrinkled leaves is conspicuous. My shrub from Dr. Rokujo, planted in 1964, is now about five feet (1.5 m) wide. This female plant first flowered in 1971 after seven years and can now be covered with red berries—which are attractive against its flat-lying leaves—when I have provided a suitable pollinator. Since my male plants are too young to flower, I lay branches of my best male *Ilex aquifolium* on the female *Ilex rugosa* while they are both in bloom. My reward is an abundance of clustered red fruit on a flat, branching spray of *Ilex rugosa* leaves, which is designated *Ilex xmeserveae* S.-y. Hu, or the blue holly. Other "meserveae" hybrids are discussed farther along.

Ilex cornuta

Ilex cornuta Lindley and Paxton has not

proved hardy on Martha's Vineyard. I have a few plants and did raise some others for a short period, but the species is, regrettably, out of range in my area.

Ilex ciliospinosa

A small tree-form holly, *Ilex ciliospinosa* Loesener grows to twenty feet (6 m). It has rather dull, leathery leaves that are narrow and serrated. It is entirely hardy and grows more compact in full sun. If grown in shade, it becomes thin and ungainly, although it will respond to pruning. In my experience, the berries,



Fruit and Leaves of Ilex ciliospinosa Loesener, a compact, evergreen shrub or small tree that attains some twenty feet (6 m) in height.

though bright red, are too few and too smelly to compete for display with many other species.

Ilex glabra

The shining inkberry, *Ilex glabra* (Linnæus) Asa Gray, is the other evergreen holly native to Martha's Vineyard. It is widespread throughout the East Coast of the United States, growing naturally in moist woods but developing best and fruiting more heavily in sun. For the most part my soils are too dry, but there are some handsome plants to be seen in sunshine. The leaves of *Ilex glabra* are spineless, narrow, and two inches (5 cm) long. Since coming on the market, the dwarf form 'Compacta' has become a commonly used, dependable plant for public areas. It can be sheared to advantage, to make barrier hedges or thickets. There are nearly white-berried forms. Unsheared (by hand or by the wind), it can reach ten feet (3 m) and is slowly stoloniferous. Inkberry is a handsome and desirable native, adaptable and easy to maintain.

Deciduous Species

The more I have worked with hollies the more I have come to appreciate the charming species, hybrids, and numerous cultivars that drop their leaves in winter. The protracted fall weather that lasted well into January of 1985 was the perfect climate for them. They made a brilliant, graceful, and natural-looking show in formal settings around public buildings, on sloping hillsides, and in island groupings along garden paths. The different shades of orange-reds and saturated

deep reds, when mixed, set each other off, adding sparkle to the whole.

There are six deciduous species of holly in my garden. Birds love them. One autumn evening five robins so gorged themselves with the fermenting fruit of *Ilex verticillata* that their eyes seemed to bulge, and they could barely move. The same autumn, a nurseryman told me that his shrubs were so heavy with berries that he had to tie the fruiting branches together to prevent them from breaking.

'Sparkleberry', a cultivar developed at the National Arboretum and registered in 1972, typifies the group. It is a hybrid of *Ilex serrata* Thunberg and *Ilex verticillata* Linnæus (Asa Gray), 'Apollo' being the male of the same cross. Forced to restrict myself to a single pair of deciduous hollies, I would choose this pair.

Ilex ambigua var. *montana*

Ilex ambigua (Michaux) Torrey var. *montana* (Torrey and Gray), or *Ilex montana*, as it used to be called, is a slender tree with long, thin, pale-green leaves. Growing on an exposed mountainside, it can appear dense and distinguished. My seed came from such a location. But in the shelter of my lowland garden the tree is thin and angular. Since I have only one blooming male and one immature seedling, I am loath to evaluate the species. This eastern holly, whose taxonomy is still unstable, may well have developed different habits as ways of adapting to the diverse environments in its range.

Ilex amelanichier

Known in the South as the swamp holly,



The Deciduous Hollies *Ilex serrata* (top) and *Ilex verticillata*, the Parents of Cultivars 'Sparkleberry' (female) and 'Apollo' (male). These two cultivars were developed at the National Arboretum, Washington, D.C. Photograph from the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum.

Ilex amelanichier M. A. Curtis is not very hardy in Martha's Vineyard's portion of Zone 6. I have been particularly attracted to its long-peduncled, red velvet berries that are very beautiful for a wildling. My seeds came from the Henry Foundation in 1970. So far, my seven plants have not flowered in the shady spot I picked for them. They grow at the edge of woods,

where it is dry, and only with morning sun. Regrettably, I cannot offer them their preference of a swamp at Barnard's Inn Farm.

Ilex decidua

The species *Ilex decidua* Walter, commonly known as possum haw, is a fine holly now and has an increasingly promising future as more and more new cultivars are introduced. My first plant trials were from Alabama seed kindly supplied by Mr. Tom Dodd. Most of them germinated, but they had a long, downhill history of growth in summer and dieback in winter. Sadly, they were eliminated, but not until I had obtained hardier clones from Mr. Bon Hartline of Anna, Illinois. These Midwestern cultivars, which are slowly maturing in our garden, are 'Council Fire', 'Pocahontas', 'Sundance', and 'Warren's Red'. I have seen their fruits as grown in Illinois, and one could want nothing finer. I found that they could be pollinated by males of *Ilex opaca*, which bloom at the same time. The fruits of *Ilex decidua* last well into the winter, offering food to wildlife after most other holly berries have been taken.

Ilex laevigata

The smooth winterberry, as *Ilex laevigata* (Pursh) Asa Gray is called, is native from Maine to Georgia and is entirely hardy with me. I have never yet found the secret of germinating its seeds, although I have tried various methods over many years. One plant was given to me by Mr. Hal Bruce of Delaware. The first year it produced a single berry, which made me

conclude that it was a female; last year, however, it had an abundance of male flowers. This interesting plant is actually quite similar to *Ilex verticillata* and grows in the same habitats in which it does, though I have failed to find it growing wild on Martha's Vineyard. *Ilex laevigata* has had an evolutionary history similar to that of *Ilex verticillata* but, Dr. Shiu-ying Hu of the Arnold Arboretum assures me, does not hybridize with it.



Fruiting Branch of *Ilex laevigata* (Pursh) Asa Gray, the Smooth Winterberry. Photographed in 1902 by Alfred Rehder. From the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum.

Ilex serrata

To my eye, the Japanese winterberry, *Ilex serrata* Thunberg, is a special treasure. The horizontal branches are characteristic of its mature form. In a class with *Acer palmatum* when it comes to graceful growth habit, it may be even better known for the great abundance of rather small, red, clustered fruits, which last for many weeks in the garden. A grouping of three or four females with a male makes a lovely island of sparkle in a semishaded corner. The bushes are five to six feet (1.5 to 2 m) tall and rather open, the better to display their natural form.

Ilex verticillata

Black alder, as the native species *Ilex verticillata* (Linnæus) Asa Gray is called on Martha's Vineyard, or winterberry, is the easiest to cultivate and the most readily available deciduous species. It is stoloniferous in wet or dry soils, fast growing, tough, and showy. Perhaps the finest display of winterberry on the Vineyard grows on the verges of Mill Stream, in West Tisbury. A single clone has gradually spread by hundreds of stolons to make a solid dome a good twenty feet (6 m) in diameter. At the peak of its berry color, after the leaves have fallen in November, it rivals a bonfire for brilliance.

By comparison with native New Jersey seedlings, the Vineyard strain of *Ilex verticillata* is a "good doer." I have named five clones of it: 'Bright Horizon', 'Earlibright', and three others with local Indian names—'Quitsa' (a place-name); 'Tiasquam' (the name of the island's only river); and 'Quansoo' (the name of a swimming beach, our favorite), a male plant

that grew spontaneously on the edge of our woods. They differ in details but not in quality or dependability. The name 'Bright Horizon' reflects the impact that our many stands of winterberry dotted along the gentle hills of Martha's Vineyard, seen against the sky, have on the viewer. The fruits of 'Earlibright' are lighter and more orange-red than those of 'Bright Horizon'.

In addition to these cultivars, I am raising cultivars of *Ilex verticillata* developed by others: 'After Glow', 'Autumn Glow', 'Harvest Red', 'Maryland Beauty', and 'Winter Red'. In addition, there are the cultivars 'Raritan Red', a male, and 'Red Sprite', a dwarf. Until they reach maturity I can only admire them all for the differing shades of red and orange of their fruits—their lavish gifts of autumn and winter display—and eagerly wait for them to mature.

There are yellow-berried forms, white-berried forms, and variegated-leaf forms of *Ilex verticillata*, in addition to these green-leaved forms with red fruits. The search for special wild forms of *Ilex verticillata* has barely begun, as has the breeding of new and better hybrids.

The female clones were all selected from seedlings raised from the fruit of a single wild plant still growing in a nearby field. I collected the seeds in 1958, stratified them for a year by hanging them in a barn, in a plastic bag of damp sphagnum moss. They germinated in 1960, and in 1961 I spaced twenty of them out in my nursery. The first females to bloom were planted out in 1963. Since *Ilex verticillata* is a highly stoloniferous species, those that were planted too close together are indistinguishable from each other when they are not in fruit. They form a solid hedge that

is as care-free as any I know. Their only pest is a leaf tier that blackens and shrivels the leaves on the tips of the branchlets. Fortunately, the leaf tier does not detract from the berry display after the leaves have fallen.

Some Successful Hybrids

Of the thirty or more named hybrids I am testing, I will name a few that have adapted well to the conditions on Martha's Vineyard. They have already survived two or three winters in the field.

For elegance and superior quality of foliage I would name a group of five siblings resulting from the cross of *Ilex cornuta* 'Burfordii #10' by *Ilex latifolia* Thunberg. Neither parent is hardy in Zone 6, but the foliage of the cross is so handsome that I am trying to keep my plants growing. Wind shelter is important. 'Amy Joel' and 'Mary Nell' are female clones. Another clone came from Mr. Bon Hartline by way of the late Dr. Joseph McDaniel; I believe there are two others. Dr. McDaniel made the cross in Mr. Tom Dodd's Nursery in Alabama.

'Clusterberry' is a three-way cross of *Ilex aquifolium* by *Ilex cornuta* by *Ilex leucoclada* (Maximowicz) Makino. A female from the National Arboretum, it is still only two feet by three feet (0.6 m by 0.9 m). It is showing itself to be a first-rate cultivar. 'September Gem' (*Ilex ciliospinosa* X *Ilex Xaquipernyi* Gable ex W. Clarke) is another good female from the National Arboretum.

'Lydia Morris' (*Ilex cornuta* 'Burfordii' X *Ilex pernyi* Franchet) was registered by the late Dr. Henry T. Skinner in 1961. An early success, it has led the field of hybridizers. There is a 'John

Morris' pollinator.

'Shin Nien' (*Ilex opaca* X *Ilex cornuta*) is a fine male registered by Dr. Joseph McDaniel of Urbana, Illinois.

There is even a four-way hybrid, produced by Dr. Elwyn Orton of Rutgers University, called 'Rock Garden' (*Ilex Xaquipernyi* X [*Ilex integra* X *Ilex pernyi*]). It has the elegance of a tight dwarf, with stylish foliage, and is a top-quality ornamental.

The blue hollies (hybrids of *Ilex Xmeserveae*) are achieving wide and deserved popularity. I lost the cultivar 'Blue Boy' to cold but have four others—'Blue Princess', 'Blue Girl', 'Blue Prince', and 'Blue Stallion'—all of them hardy, handsome, and desirable.

Many variegated plants of differing genetic background have grown poorly in my conditions, but I do have two plants of 'Sunny Foster' (*Ilex cassine* Linnaeus X *Ilex opaca* or *Ilex cassine* X *Ilex Xattenuata* Ashe). The more sun it gets the more gold there is in its leaves; the more shade, the more growth it makes. *Ilex cassine* is, of course, tender on Martha's Vineyard, but the hybrid is most attractive. I hope it survives and adapts.

There is a three-way chance hybrid that I have registered as 'Pernella' (presumably [*Ilex cornuta* X *Ilex pernyi*] X *Ilex aquifolium*). The plant has large, spherical red berries, enormous vigor and health, with a strong central leader and a good rate of growth. J. Franklin Styer Nursery is propagating it.

Exploring the Great Diversity of Hollies

Readers intrigued by the growing diversity within the genus *Ilex* may wish to join the Holly Society of America (304 North

Wind Road, Baltimore, Maryland 21204). Through the Society, its publications and conventions, they will learn much about hollies and will be able to join in the activities of its members.

In Belgium, there is a new arboretum, Domein Bokrijk, where as large a collection of hollies as possible is being amassed. There is another, in Korea, whose name, Chollipo, means holly. Its owner, Mr. Carl Ferris Miller, is already responsible for some choice introductions.

If one needed still newer hollies to augment the diverse species now in cultivation, he could turn explorer. He might begin with eastern South America—Brazil—the center of distribution of *Ilex*, then proceed to the islands of Polynesia, to Taiwan, China, the Canary Islands, or even the wooded coastal zones of the eastern United States. In these places and many more there are hollies waiting to be found, propagated, named, distributed, and enjoyed.

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