

# *Ilex pedunculosa*: The Longstalk Holly

Phyllis Andersen

In the fall of 1892, during his first plant collecting trip to Japan, Charles Sprague Sargent admired a distinctive holly growing along the Nagasendo Highway, the famous mountain road connecting Kyoto to Edo (now Tokyo). He found the plant growing both in the wild and in the gardens of local inns, sometimes as a shrub only two to three feet high and sometimes as a well-formed tree as tall as twenty to thirty feet, with a narrow, round-headed top. Its oval leaves were a lustrous, dark green. But its most distinctive feature was its long flower stems, or peduncles, which in the early fall drooped under the weight of bright red fruit, not unlike the stems of fruiting cherry trees.

The plant that had so impressed Sargent was *Ilex pedunculosa*, the longstalk holly, first described for publication by the Dutch botanist Friedrich Anton Wilhelm Miquel in 1868. Its affinity with the hollies of New England made it of particular interest to Sargent, who was committed to researching the similarities between the floras of eastern Asia and eastern North America. The plant's appeal was further enhanced by Sargent's desire to add plants of significant ornamental value to the Arnold Arboretum's collection. Later Sargent hired the British plant explorer E. H. Wilson to further pursue the study of Asian flora, and in 1907 Wilson sent seeds of *I. pedunculosa* from China back to Boston.



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With lustrous leaves, bright red fruit, and dependable hardiness throughout zone 5, the longstalk holly is a broadleaf evergreen that few in New England can rival



E. H. Wilson photographed this 25-foot-tall longstalk holly in China, 1909. In cultivation the plant attains little more than half that height

The first plants propagated from this seed were set out on the Arboretum's Hickory Path, where their ornamental qualities and hardiness were evaluated for many years. Having performed well at that site, they were moved in 1970 to an area near the Arboretum's administration building, where they still form a distinctive part of the setting.

The evergreen leaves of *Ilex pedunculosa* are oval in shape, one to three inches long and three-fourths to one-and-one-quarter inch wide. They lack the spines so characteristic of the American holly (*I. opaca*) and the European holly (*I. aquifolium*). Several writers have noted the leaves'

resemblance to those of mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*); Sargent, on the other hand, compared them to those of "our wild cherry." In the Boston area, the plant produces inconspicuous white flowers in mid June. The bright red berries, or drupes, as they are called, are often as large as those of *I. aquifolium*, nearly one inch long and one-quarter inch in diameter. They appear in early fall and persist on the plant throughout the season if not eaten by the birds.

The branching pattern of the longstalk holly is generally upright, becoming more open as the plant matures. While plants in the wild can attain up to 30 feet in height, they are smaller in cultivation, reaching at most 15 feet. Like all hollies, *Ilex pedunculosa* prefers a well-drained, slightly acidic soil and thrives in partial shade. It has few disease or pest problems. In common with other hollies, it is dioecious, having male and female reproductive structures on separate plants; for a good fruiting display on female plants, grow a small male plant in the same general area. (A ratio of one male to up to six females is recommended.)

Having observed that in Japan *Ilex pedunculosa* was found at high elevations that were subject to "excessive winter cold," Sargent hoped that the plant would thrive in New England, where the traditional English and American hollies are prone to winter injury. His hopes were fulfilled: *I. pedunculosa* is dependably hardy through USDA zone 5 and has survived severe winters at the Arnold Arboretum better than many other broadleaved evergreens.

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