



Photo by Elizabeth DuBose

Ossabaw: Place of the Yaupon Holly

The name Ossabaw is widely believed to be derived from a Muskogean word that loosely translates to “land of holly” or “holly bush growing place.” Ossabaw has historically been recorded by early European cartographers as “Osbo,” “Hoospa,” and “Osspo.” The holly bush refers to the yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*) that grows abundantly across the island.

Yaupon is “an evergreen shrub or tree that is loved for the colorful berries it produces on the female plants. Yaupon is dioecious, which means that male and female flowers are born on separate plants. Male yaupon hollies do not produce berries. The berries can be red, orange, or even yellow, and birds and other wildlife will feed on them through the winter months. Both male and female plants produce small white flowers in spring which attract pollinators. Their small leaves are oval, serrated, and dark green.”

Yaupon holly is also known as cassina (derived from the Timucuan language, a northern Florida tribe.) Yaupon is native to coastal areas from the Tidewater region of Virginia to the Gulf Coast of Texas. It was a valuable pre-Columbian commodity and was widely traded.

Yaupon is the only plant native to North America that contains the stimulants caffeine and theobromine in its leaves. This caffeinated beverage of choice for indigenous North Americans was also known as the black drink. The leaves were roasted and steeped in water to make a tea that was consumed daily. A stronger version of the tea was used as part of a rite-of-passage type purification ceremony witnessed by early European explorers.

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Both Carl Linnaeus, the Swedish botanist, and William Aiton, an eminent British botanist and horticulturist, are credited with giving yaupon the scientific name it bears to this day: *Ilex vomitoria*. *Ilex* is the genus commonly known as holly. *Vomitoria* roughly translates to “makes you vomit.” This name prevented cassina or yaupon from being a successful commercial commodity. Some research suggests that the name was part of a conspiracy to tamp down the trade of yaupon tea in favor of the East India Company’s virtual monopoly on the traditional tea trade.

Early settlers did trade with the indigenous for yaupon, sending it back to Europe under several different names. The English called it Carolina tea, South Seas tea and cassina. Spanish settlers referred to yaupon as Indian chocolate because of its sweet flavor. The French referred to Yaupon as Appalachine after the Apalachicola tribes that had taught them about the plant. Yaupon was also known as liberty tea, sent to Boston to replace imported tea after the Boston Tea Party. “Cassina was so abundant on the coast,” writes Charles M. Hudson in *Black Drink: A Native American Tea*, “that it could be drunk by the poor; hence it became déclassé.” Today it’s better known as yaupon, and it’s mostly planted as an ornamental throughout the southeastern United States.

On Ossabaw Island, the Ossabaw Island Foundation features yaupon holly as a history, science and culture educational program. As part of the program we brew yaupon leaves that have been harvested and roasted on the island, and serve the tea to our guests.

In 2010, island host and coastal naturalist John “Crawfish” Crawford made yaupon tea as part of a program for a coastal ecology weekend group. Program participants Kevin Ryan and Meredith Sutton, owners of Savannah’s Service Brewing Company, were inspired to create a unique craft beer brewed with yaupon tea. Since then, each fall, Service brews and serves an Ossabaw beer flavored with yaupon. This year’s brew is Boneyard Double IPA; it was served at the 2023 Ossabaw Island Pig Roasts.

Gardeners interested in cultivating a little bit of Ossabaw Island in their backyard can find this native plant at most nurseries or garden centers. Consider yaupon for a hedge, screen, barrier, or grow it in a large pot. Yaupon holly’s fast growth rate and small leaves make it a perfect choice for topiary—or for an abundant backyard source of home brew Ossabaw tea.

Sources: *American Botanical Council* herbalgram.com; *University of Florida* gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu; *Black Drink: A Native American Tea*, Hudson, Charles M. (ed.), UGA Press; atlasobscura.com/articles/what-is-yaupon-tea-cassina



John “Crawfish” Crawford, coastal naturalist and Ossabaw Island host, relaxes at the foot of the oldest tree on Ossabaw Island. Photo by Elizabeth DuBose.

Watch How to Brew Yaupon Tea
with John “Crawfish” Crawford



Boneyard Double IPA is Service Brewing Company’s 2023 yaupon brew, inspired by Ossabaw Island. Photo courtesy of Service Brewing Company.