

**BORDER CROSSINGS**

# **ORIGINS**

**BOTANY BAY LEARNING RESOURCES**

Yaupon Holly



The berries of a Yaupon holly bush (*Ilex vomitoria*)

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yaupon\\_holly\\_berries.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yaupon_holly_berries.JPG)

What do Indigenous people call this plant?

The name is derived from the Catawba word “yop”, meaning “tree”. The oldest-known evidence of Yaupon consumption comes from the Cahokia Mounds in Illinois, where the holly’s residue was identified inside ornately decorated ceramic vessels dating to 1050 AD.

When was this plant first documented?

Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, first documented Yaupon while exploring the Texas coast in 1542. English-Jamaican merchant Jonathan Dickinson, who wrote about several Yaupon ceremonies after being shipwrecked in the area now known as Florida in 1696.

### How many varieties of this plant are known?

There is only one variety of Yaupon holly. However, gardeners have selectively bred many variants for height and size and it is mostly used as an attractive ornamental garden plant.

### Where and how was the plant originally grown and used?

Yaupon holly grows wild in much of Northern America. It was later cultivated but was mostly foraged for. Yaupon tea has traditionally been drunk by the Creek, Timucua, Chitimacha, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, Apalachee, Mvskoke and many others. Some of these people call it "the white drink" as it symbolises happiness, social harmony and purity. Additionally, white is the colour of peace and friendship to Southeastern Peoples, and so for them it was called "the white drink", regardless of the colour when it was served.

### How do Indigenous people relate to this plant?

The Seminole regard it as a tonic for health which helps ward off illness. In Hitchiti the word for the tea is "asi" (meaning "leaves"). The Apalachee of northern Florida call it "Cassina". The Catawba of North Carolina call it "Yaupon", which is the common name of the plant today.

As well as serving as part of social bonding rituals, it is thought that the tea cleanses the soul and serving it is considered an expression of hospitality.

Interestingly, the Spanish who first encountered it called it "the black drink" because of its colour, and this term is used by some Indigenous people too.

### When and how did this plant first come to Britain?

During the 1700s, Yaupon tea was in direct competition with Asian tea and became a major source of income for the Carolina colony. It was sold as Cassina in England and Appalachina in France. The Spanish, Portuguese, Italians, Dutch and Germans all began importing and drinking it.

### Special properties

Yaupon Holly is drought resistant and easy to grow. It contains less caffeine than coffee but does contain theobromine which is also found in dark chocolate and is known to stimulate the pleasure centres of the brain. It also has anti-inflammatory properties. It is thought to reduce tooth decay, it contains antioxidants which boost the immune system and may offer protection against leukaemia and cancer.

### Fun facts

The unfortunate naming of the plant by botanist William Aiton in 1789 linked the plant to ritual vomiting and drove away customers. The name 'vomitoria' is the scientific name that comes from Yaupon tea's historical association with purifying rituals where large amounts of tea were drunk and thought to induce vomiting. The tea is perfectly safe to drink and does not cause vomiting (it has no emetic qualities). Eating the berries however, will definitely make you sick.

After the Great Depression and with increased availability of tea and coffee, the gathering of Yaupon leaves and twigs was seen as something only the uneducated poor would do. Because of the stigma

associated with poverty, it was looked down on and its consumption rapidly fell in the United States. Today, with the recovery of Indigenous practices and traditions, Yaupon holly is being widely cultivated and drunk again.

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