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with the Littleton Garden Club  
*The secret lives of winterberry plants*

BY BETSY FRASER

Littleton Garden Club

I have long admired winterberry holly plants and wanted to add them to my landscape. Winterberry is a native American shrub in the holly, or Ilex, genus. Different from other hollies, winterberry is deciduous and loses its leaves in cooler month while maintaining its beautiful red berries. The plants add interest to the winter landscape and the berries are a popular food source for winter birds. Not to mention, you can snip off a few branches with berries and use them in holiday floral arrangements or wreaths.

For years, I've kept an eye open for winterberry plants when I visit area nurseries, but I've never found any. When I ask those who have winterberry shrubs how they came by them, they often tell me they ordered the plants by mail, which wasn't of interest to me. Imagine my surprise when I found about 15 winterberry shrubs in the garden section of a local big box store. The Proven Winners label showed a photo of a plant with red berries named Little Goblin Red. I read the label and learned that Little Goblin Red will be covered with exceptionally large red berries in fall and winter. That's good. But I also learned that it's a female plant and in order to bear berries she must be planted in close proximity to a male plant. The label specified to use Little Guy Goblin as the pollinator.

Winterberry plants are dioecious, meaning a plant either bears flowers that will turn into berries (female plant) or flowers that will bear pollen (male plant). Usually, one male winterberry plant will pollinate 5 female plants provided they're planted within 50 feet

of each other. I looked through all of the plants, every one was Little Goblin Red, not a male to be found! I decided to postpone my purchase until a Little Guy was available.

During May, whenever I was in the garden center, I continued to check the winterberry plants. There were still only female plants and the number of plants was decreasing which meant customers were purchasing them even without the male plants. I spoke to the small seasonal nursery in my town. The salesperson assured me they never sell winterberry plants because they focus on shrubs that have summer interest.

I continued to watch the number of winterberry plants dwindle at the big box store and finally I couldn't resist any longer, and I purchased 3 Proven Winners Little Goblin Reds. I figured I would find a way to locate a Little Goblin Guy even if I had to purchase him on-line. And so began the search on-line for Little Goblin Guy. But he was "out of stock" everywhere I looked including on the Proven Winners website. However, Proven Winners mentioned that their winterberry male plant, Mr. Poppins, would be an acceptable partner for Little Goblin Red. Generally, Mr. Poppins is paired with Berry Poppins or Berry Heavy, but in a pinch, he also likes Little Goblin Red. What fun it must be to name these plants!

I found Mr. Poppins on-line and placed my order because I really needed male company for my girls. My Little Goblin Reds are mature, standing about 18 to 20 inches tall and they were entering their flowering stage in early June. I needed a flowering male plant as soon as possible because this was the window of

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pollination. Oh dear, Mr. Poppins arrived in his shipping container and while in good condition, he's a much younger plant standing only about eight inches tall and he's probably a few years from developing the flowers needed to pollinate the female plants. Good grief. I felt like I was running a dating service and not doing very well at it.

I've been purchasing various native shrubs from my local nursery. I was checking their inventory and noticed new plants had come in. The very store that said they would never stock winterberry shrubs now had a collection of them for sale. The females are Red Sprite and her male partner is Jim Dandy grown by Baily Nurseries in Minnesota. Sprite and Jim are described as dense compact winterberry plants and the females produce multitudes of bright red fruits that persist through winter.

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Now I was really torn. If only I had waited, I could have purchased a few Sprites and a Jim as they are sweethearts that will produce berries. But I already had three Little Goblin Reds and an immature Mr. Poppins. Life is complicated. Could Jim serve as the pollinator for the Goblins? I researched winterberry plants and found charts showing which plants will successfully partner to bear berries. But nothing mentioned Jim and Goblin.

I learned that a major difference among winterberry plants is whether they are early or late bloomers. It's critical that both male and female plants bloom at the same time to have successful pollination and get berries on the female plants. The Proven Winners website notes that all of

the winterberries they produce are in the early blooming group. I finally found the answer I was looking for. A single sentence in Proven Winner's "Ultimate Guide to Winterberry Holly" says that if the ideal Proven Winners male pollinator is not available, Jim Dandy, a widely grown older selection, is suitable since Jim is also in the winterberry early blooming group. That information was difficult to find, but so important!

I raced back to my local nursery store and purchased a Jim Dandy and also got his girlfriend, Red Sprite. I found a nice location on my property for the winterberries. Jim is planted within the required 50 feet of all of the girls, he has Little Goblins and Red Sprite nearby. Mr. Poppins is residing in a container until he's mature enough to join the group.

All of the mature plants, both male (Jim) and females (Goblin and Sprite), developed small white flowers during June. In early July small green berries are developing on the branches of all of the female plants, both Goblin and Sprite. Pollination was successful! Thank you, Jim and ladies! By the way, male plants don't develop berries but are obviously critical to berry production. It's been quite a journey and I'm relieved this story has a happy ending. All of the plants are doing well and I'm looking forward to beautiful red berries to brighten my landscape and for foraging birds this winter and for many winters to come.

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