

Groundcovers to Beat the Band

By Kim Smith

The ground beneath flowering trees and shrubs affords myriad possibilities for planting wildflowers, bulbs, and groundcovers. I am partial to ground covers that serve more than one purpose—flowering in spring (with fragrance an added bonus), later providing an airy green canvas for summer blossoms, and growing where a weed might otherwise take its place in the border. Periwinkle (*Vinca minor*) is a perennial favorite, with emerald green trailing tendrils and ease in transplant-ability. The early and long-flowering true-blue blossoms combine handsomely with bloodroot, jonquils, violas, bunchberry, forget-me-nots, and lily of-the-valley. Although some may consider periwinkle invasive, I find that in our climate it grows steadily, not too vigorously, and is easily pulled from where it is not wanted. The densely forming roots of *V. minor* prevent erosion by stabilizing the soil. The growth is easy to separate and spring flowering bulbs can be dug-in without much difficulty, and after flowering, as the foliage of the bulbs withers, the lush green of the trailing tendrils detracts your eye. The undemanding periwinkle thrives in a variety of light and soil conditions—the dry shade beneath deciduous trees, light, part and full shade.

The low growing dogwood shrub, or bunchberry (*Cornus canadensis*), provides ground cover in the moist and dappled shaded areas of the garden. Bunchberry is a bit more of a challenge to establish, but well worth the wait. A native woodland groundcover that grows throughout the boreal half of North America, *C. canadensis* looks like a miniaturized version of the flowering dogwood tree, *Cornus florida*. The sparkling white, quarterized leaf bracts surround the true flowers, which are arranged in a dense terminal cluster. *C. canadensis* spreads by underground runners and is often found along the woodland edge. To simulate the partly shaded and acidic soil of its natural habitat, we grow ours at the outer margins of the boughs of the ‘Dragon Lady’ holly and mulch with pine needles from a recycled Christmas wreath. *Cornus* is from the Latin *cornu*, which means “horn” or “antler” and *canadensis*, “of Canada.” The common name bunchberry is thought to be derived from the appearance of the tightly clustered fruits. Other common names are dwarf dogwood, Canadian bunchberry, and crackerberry. Bunchberry is an important food source for wildlife and is occasionally referred to as bearberry because bears return to large colonies to eat the fruit. New Englanders called it puddingberry, as pectin in the fruit was a substitute for cornstarch, and the French Canadians commonly referred to bunchberry as *quatre-temps* for the arrangement of the four leaf bracts.

With its incomparable perfume and snow-white flowers issuing forth in the bright hopeful season of spring, the lily of-the-valley has long been associated in literature with sweetness and the return of happiness. The lily of-the-valley, known also as May lily and May bells, is native to northern Europe, the Allegheny Mountains of North America, and the British Isles. Between a pair of unfurling new-green leaves emerges a diminutive arching scape, covered in dangling chubby bells. Their fabulous fragrance floats freely throughout the garden, unusual for a plant that grows close to the ground.

Beloved wherever it is grown, for its ineffable scent and sweet flowers, the lily of-the-valley is used extensively for perfumes, soaps, and toilet water, nowhere more so than in Europe. The French translation is *muguet des bois* (of the wood), the German translation is *mit Maiglockchen*, the Italian *al mughetto*, the Spanish say *lirio del valle*, the Finnish translation is *lehmakielo*, and the Swedish say *liljekonvalj*. *Convallaria majalis* is the native species of

northern Europe. The name *Convallaria* is from two Latin words meaning “with” and “valley,” having reference to its habit of growing on mountain slopes. *Convallaria majuscula* is the species indigenous to North America. *C. majuscula* is found growing in remote woodland locations, along the mountainsides and ridges of Virginia, West Virginia, and south to Georgia. *C. majuscula* is nearly identical to *C. majalis*, with slightly smaller though equally fragrant flowers. *C. majalis* is a vigorous perennial ground cover with a rhizomatic root structure that grows and spreads quickly. Thriving in nearly every light condition save full sun, lily of-the-valley never disappoints. Light, fertile, and damp soil is the preferred growing medium of *C. majalis*. Provided with an annual mulch of compost or decaying leaves, lily of-the-valley multiplies rapidly. With its cold hardiness, ability to spread readily, and pervasively fragrant blossoms it is incomparable as a ground cover. The one drawback of lily of-the-valley is that, come late August, the foliage browns and becomes a bit tattered. Plant with late season blooming perennials and bulbs, Japanese anemones and peacock orchids, for example, to draw your eye up and away from the foliage.

No flower amid the garden fairer grows
Than the sweet lily of the lowly vale,
The queen of flowers.

—John Keats (1795-1821)

Well there you have three groundcovers, two that are easy to cultivate and one a bit more difficult, but once established will make your gardening life easier. After we had a vigorous and dense patch of lily of-the-valley underway, I began to dig small clumps and either gave them to friends or transplanted the little patches throughout the borders. I imagined how delightful it would be to create a fragrant carpet of lily of-the-valley. Our postage stamp of a lot is almost entirely enclosed in the rear yard, which has the effect of holding fragrance within. When the sweet lily is in full bloom the scent is indescribably dreamy. To transplant and divide both lily of-the-valley and periwinkle water thoroughly, or wait until after a good soaking rain, to allow the roots to relax. Plunge a serrated edge knife into the soil, cut out a patch as generous as possible without creating too large a gaping hole, and either parcel into smaller bits with roots attached, or plop the entire plug into the desired location. Firm the soil around the roots and water well. Refill the hole left by the transplant with compost or rich garden loam.

Cornus canadensis

