



LET'S GROW Native

Column and photographs
by Carol A. Heiser

Got groundcover? Native plants are an effective replacement for conventional non-natives, many of which unfortunately are quite prevalent. Non-native exotics such as English ivy (*Hedera helix*), periwinkle (*Vinca major* and *V. minor*), and winter creeper (*Euonymus fortunei*) are aggressive invasives, notorious for escaping cultivation and taking over the ground layer of unmanaged, forested natural areas. As these introduced species spread along the ground (and ivy also spreads up into the trees), they can gradually colonize acres of new sites and eventually smother and displace native vegetation, disrupt local food webs, and reduce habitat diversity overall.

Attempting to replace these ubiquitous, ornamental invasives with sustainable, native alternatives is a good first step towards restoring ecological balance to the landscape. Re-establishing native variety on the ground plane will support a greater diversity of insects and other wildlife species. Native groundcovers can be deciduous, evergreen, or semi-evergreen, and it's a good idea to plant a mix of species to ensure adequate coverage and diversity.

Favorite deciduous natives for shady or partially shady areas include common wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*) and ferns, such as southern lady fern (*Athyrium asplenoides*) and sensitive fern (*Onoclea sensibilis*). In sunnier areas, common blue violet (*Viola sororia*),

which is a host plant for the fritillary butterfly, and other violet species readily disperse and spread.

Where sites are sheltered from winter winds or have a southern-facing exposure, foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*), green-and-gold (*Chrysogonum virginianum*), and coralbells or alum-root (*Heuchera americana*) may grow as semi-evergreen.

Christmas fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*) is a popular evergreen that's easy to get established in the ground layer, but it grows in clumps and doesn't spread, so you'll need to plant several of them in groupings, if you want to fill up a space. Partridge-berry (*Mitchella repens*) and wintergreen or teaberry (*Gaultheria procumbens*) are delicate looking, trailing evergreens that provide dark-green accents. They grow very slowly and take a long time to fill areas, but are a nice addition when tucked around the bases of trees or under broadly branching shrubs.

Moss phlox (*Phlox subulata*), an evergreen that's native to parts of the Piedmont and mountain areas of the state, spreads nicely to form thick, low mats and will reward you with lovely pink blooms and butterfly visitors next spring.

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Clockwise bottom: Foamflower, native ferns, and wild ginger form lush cover throughout the growing season and typically die back after the first frost.



Christmas fern offers year-round green and an interesting textural element.



Partridge-berry, seen here in spring bloom, is an evergreen creeper.

RESOURCES

- ◆ Groundcovers—www.plantnovatives.org/groundcovers
- ◆ *Native Alternatives to English Ivy*—<https://vnps.org/vnps-brochures>
- ◆ List of Native Groundcovers in *Eight Essential Elements of Conservation Landscaping*—https://cblpro.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/8_elements_2013-1.pdf