



November 2010

## Plants of the Month

### Virginia Creeper

*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*

The magenta pink leaves of Virginia creeper bring surprising fall color wherever it goes—and it goes just about anywhere. Birds relish its blue berries and spread them liberally. A great food source for wildlife, it can grow in full shade to full sun, city to sandy seashore, and just about anywhere in between. Its five leaves are arranged in fan-like clusters (palmate). It's often confused with poison ivy, but poison ivy has clusters of three leaves and the vines are hairy, whereas Virginia creeper vines are not. Virginia creeper is a fast-growing woody—up to 6-10 feet in a season and ultimately 30-50 feet depending upon its support. Little adhesive discs hold this native vine on rock walls, fences, or trees. In trees it is loose so it doesn't strangle like some vines. It also scrambles like a ground cover. The adhesive cups are difficult to scrape off if painting is required. Volunteer plants are easy to either transplant or pull up.



### Partridgeberry

*Mitchella repens*

This delicate ground hugging plant is that prized rarity—a native evergreen ground cover. Its highly fragrant flowers are borne in white or pinkish pairs over a long period spring to summer. These are followed by red berries (drupes, really) that appear from fall into winter, giving it four charming seasons of interest. Slowly, it forms a dark green mat about 2" high, provided you have a spot it likes—and it's not unreasonable. An Eastern woodland native, it needs full shade and acid soil, moist but well-drained, that is as much like a forest floor as possible. Amend soil generously with leaf compost, peat, or ground pine fine amendments where necessary. Purchase as a container plant with a good amount of native soil attached.



## **Willow oak**

*Quercus phellos*

No leaves to rake up? Under a big shade tree? Sounds like a dream, but willow oaks come closest. The long, thin leaves, so unusual for an oak, disperse by autumn winds and can seemingly disappear in the landscape. Mowing speeds up their decomposition. Leaves unfurl yellow-bronze in spring, maturing to a deep green. Fall color ranges from yellow to bronze to reddish-browns. This east coast native reaches about 40-60 feet or higher in a highly favorable spot. Pyramidal in youth, willow oaks become more spreading and oval with age. Saplings may need pruning to encourage a single leader. Very flexible in its cultural requirements, willow oak prefers moist well-drained soil. Transplant when dormant.



## **Dwarf Alberta Spruce**

*Picea glauca* 'Conica'

With a perfect “Christmas tree” shape, dense foliage, and extremely slow growth, dwarf Alberta spruce has been a favorite since discovered in 1904. Remember-it’s “Alberta” as in Alberta, Canada, a much cooler environment than Maryland. Fairly adaptable nevertheless, this spruce likes well drained moist soil, full sun, and will tolerate some shade. Baking drought and reflected light (e.g. off house siding), however, can lead to spider mites. Encourage predator insects that eat spider mites by only spraying with horticultural oil or soap or simply hosing them off the tree. The thin needles of Alberta spruce give a fuzzy appearance. Growing only 2-4” yearly, it can reach 10-12 feet in height, so give it space to spread. The pyramidal shape lends itself to balanced and formal designs as well as shrub and mixed borders.



## Meserve Hybrid Hollies

*Ilex x meserveae*

If you are seeking berries and beautiful holly foliage, these hybrids are the plants for you. Meserve hollies are an entire group of hybridized plants including Blue Hollies, the “China Series”, and others. The growth habit of these broadleaved evergreens range from dense and shrubby to pyramidal. They are best used as hedges, specimens, understory plants, or informal barrier plantings. Cultivars sport blue-green or green shiny leaves with spines on the leaf margins. Small white flowers are produced in April/ May and attract pollinators. Female plants produce bright red berries in autumn. You will need a specific variety of male pollinator nearby for good fruit set. Robins, catbirds, and mockingbirds relish the berries and can take refuge in the evergreen canopy. Most in this family grow to about 8 feet in height and width, but it varies by cultivar. Prefers moist well drained soil in full sun to partial shade. Plants are cold hardy but avoid windswept locations. Little pruning is needed for these carefree evergreens.



**Do you have a plant or insect pest question? Call the Home and Garden Information Center 1-800-342-2507**