
Wildflower Spot – January 2007
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

PARTRIDGE-BERRY

Mitchella repens

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One of the most adaptable and easy-to-grow groundcovers for the home gardener in the Southeast, partridge-berry displays edible, but insipid berries ten months of the year. An 18th century writer reported “The leaves are much celebrated by the common people as a diuretic and sweetener of the blood, but are of very little efficacy. The berries are rather of an agreeable taste.” Native American women took frequent doses during the few weeks before giving birth.

Partridge-berry is a creeping, delicate vine, does not climb and is often covered by fallen leaves. The stems take root at the nodes and form a mat. It transplants easily, grows quickly, but rarely becomes a pest.

In late spring, the two paired white flowers at the tip of each shoot open their four-petaled buds. At flowering time, the two flowers are already partially fused. Both flowers must be pollinated to produce the red “double-berry”, which stays on the vine until after blooms appear in the spring. Look closely and you will be able to see on the top of the “double-berry” the scars marking the attachment of both flowers. Also known as “twinberry”, the plant is evergreen, and grows well in rich, dappled shade. It most often occurs on small knolls in the woodlands.



Linnaeus named this plant *Mitchella* for his friend John Mitchell, a resident of Urbanna, Virginia, who was a physician, naturalist, plant lover, and cartographer. Dr. Mitchell developed a method of treating yellow fever victims and saved thousands of lives. “*Repens*” refers to the plant’s trailing or creeping growth pattern. ❖

Photo: Partridge-Berry (*Mitchella repens*) taken by Helen Hamilton
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