

Alternative Groundcovers

By Susan Camp

In the final line of last week's article, I said of mature English ivy that has grown into a tree, "Cut it down and plant a different groundcover." How do you figure out which groundcover won't take over your garden beds and sneak into the woods? On the one hand, we are bombarded with warnings against planting non-native species that have become backyard invaders. On the other hand, we are seduced by glossy magazine photos and lush, alluring exotics at garden centers. If groundcovers like English ivy and other invasive vines are planted, gardeners must remain dedicated to keeping them under control, either in containers or restricted to a bed with physical boundaries.

Other invasive groundcovers to avoid include Japanese honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*), common and bigleaf periwinkles (*Vinca minor* and *Vinca major*), big blue lilyturf (*Liriope muscari* or *L. playphylla*.) and creeping liriop (Liriope spicata). NatureServe.org, which developed "An Invasive Species Assessment Protocol" ranks *Vinca minor* as a low impact invasive plant and *Vinca major* as having a medium impact on its environment. Both species of liriop grow by spreading rhizomes that form thick, impenetrable mats and are listed as invasive in "A Field Guide for the Identification of Invasive Plants in Southern Forests" (a great resource). *Liriope muscari* forms clumps and is considered the less invasive of the two; it can be controlled.

What are positive qualities or characteristics of a groundcover? Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-609 "Selecting Landscape Plants: Groundcovers" lists five desirable qualities to look for. The first is height. A groundcover is defined as a plant less than three feet tall. Groundcovers less than one foot in height allow more sunlight to penetrate the soil, leading to more weeds. The second quality is foliage persistence: is the groundcover deciduous or evergreen? How important is year-round coverage? The next characteristic to examine is the method of spread. Groundcovers can spread by growth of lateral branches; side branches that develop roots; new offshoots of the original plant; shoots that develop from underground rhizomes or aboveground runners; or suckers that grow from the roots. Growth rate is the fourth characteristic. Are you trying to cover an area quickly to prevent erosion or is a more leisurely growth rate acceptable? Finally, how important are the aesthetic qualities of the plant, such as color, texture, form, and flowers and fruit?

The same publication contains a two page list of suggested groundcovers. A few of the plants featured in the article are exotics that can spread outside their planting beds and cause problems for the home gardener. This does not mean that all non-native plants are bad and should be avoided. Hostas (*Hosta* spp.), which are native to Asia, come in various sizes, colors, and textures and are popular deciduous groundcovers for shady areas. Climbing hydrangea vine

(*Hydrangea anomala* subsp. *petiolaris*), another Asian native, grows in full sun to full shade. It flowers in June and roots wherever the stems come into contact with the soil.

Creeping juniper (*Juniperus horizontalis*) 'Blue Rug' is a beautiful silver-blue evergreen that grows to about five inches in height, making it prone to weed infestation. Shore juniper (*Juniperus conferta*) 'Blue Pacific', with blue-green needles and trailing branches, reaches 18 inches in height in full sun. It tolerates sandy soils and salt spray. Most junipers require well-drained soil and are relatively drought resistant.

The Virginia Native Plant Society brochure "Wildflowers for Woodland Gardens" includes native groundcovers for shady areas. Allegheny pachysandra (*Pachysandra procumbens*) has mottled foliage and white flower spikes. Creeping phlox (*Phlox stolonifera*) comes in pink, lavender, white, or blue flowered types with almost evergreen foliage.

There is hope for finding a groundcover that doesn't invade like English ivy. Choose groundcover plants and vines carefully and wisely; you will be rewarded with many worry-free summers of sitting in your Adirondack chairs, enjoying the greenery.

March 17, 2016