

Spring Blooms for Shady Spots

By Susan Camp

Spring is my favorite season, just because it's spring. I say the same thing about every season, but spring is the only one I enjoy the whole way through. After the long, dreary winter, I am ready to see dainty, green leaves and delicate, pastel blooms poking through newly thawed earth. Time enough in summer for big, gaudy flowers in psychedelic colors.

Two of my favorite plants for shady spots bear bright green foliage and white blossoms. Both form excellent groundcovers that are aggressive without becoming invasive.

Convallaria majalis is the beautiful lily-of-the-valley, beloved by brides for bouquets and for its familiar, sweet fragrance, a component of many perfumes. *Convallaria* grows well in full sun to full shade in USDA Hardiness Zones 3 through 8, although it may struggle in our hot, humid summers, and will do best on the shady side of the house or along the edge of the woods. Lily-of-the-valley needs rich, moist, well-drained soil, but if you grow it in a container, be careful not to overwater. I found this out the hard way; the plants will rot. In the fall, the leaves wilt and become shabby. Mulch the plants with compost or well-rotted manure. In the winter, *convallaria* can be potted and treated as a houseplant, then returned to the garden in the spring.

Green, sword-shaped leaves appear in April to May, followed by dainty, white bells that hang from threadlike stalks. *Convallaria* spreads by fleshy, underground rhizomes called "pips" and makes an excellent groundcover. It is propagated by dividing, after it flowers in the spring or in the fall. The plants form mats or clumps 6 to 12 inches tall with a spread of 9 to 12 inches, although they can spread indefinitely if left unrestrained. *Convallaria* is native to temperate regions of North America and is not considered invasive. An added bonus is that it is deer and rabbit resistant. The downside is that all parts of *convallaria* contain potent chemicals that affect the heart rate and are toxic to humans and animals. Care must be taken when growing lily-of-the-valley around young children and pets.

'Fortin's Giant' (Fortin's Variety) is a popular cultivar that reaches 12 to 15 inches in height. 'Rosea' is a pink variety and 'Flore Pleno' bears double flowers. Anthracnose, leaf spot, and stem rot occasionally affect *convallaria*. There are no serious insect pests.

Galium odoratum, commonly called sweet woodruff or sweet-scented bedstraw is another personal favorite. It is a spring-blooming perennial groundcover that thrives in part to full shade in Zones 4 through 8. Sweet woodruff is native to Europe, North Africa, and Asia, but is not considered invasive. It will spread aggressively by rhizomes and self-seeding, but will not crowd out other plants. I grow sweet woodruff in a large container, where it can form a trailing mass. It needs rich, well-drained soil and tolerates a pH range from 4.3 to 8.3, but prefers mildly acidic soil.

Sweet woodruff works well in a shady, naturalized setting or in a rock garden. It grows to a height of 6 to 12 inches with a spread of 9 to 18 inches, forming a mat that can be mowed with a rotary mower. It tolerates black walnut and is deer-resistant and has no serious insect pests. Rust, mildew, and leaf spot occasionally affect sweet woodruff.

Bright green lance-shaped leaves form umbrella-like whorls. Tiny white flowers appear in early spring and continue through mid-summer. Leaves and flowers smell like new-mown hay; the fragrance increases when the plants are dried, making sweet woodruff a popular component of sachets and potpourri. Sweet woodruff is the flavoring for May Wine, a traditional German May Day drink of white and sparkling wines with strawberries.

The Cornell University “Flower Growing Guides” at www.gardening.cornell.edu/homegardening/scence139.html and Missouri Botanical Garden at <http://missouribotanicalgarden.org/plantfinder/plantfindersearch.aspx> provide basic growing information on *Convallaria majalis*, *Galium odoratum*, and many other native and exotic plants. Savor the springtime and discover some new and different plants!

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