

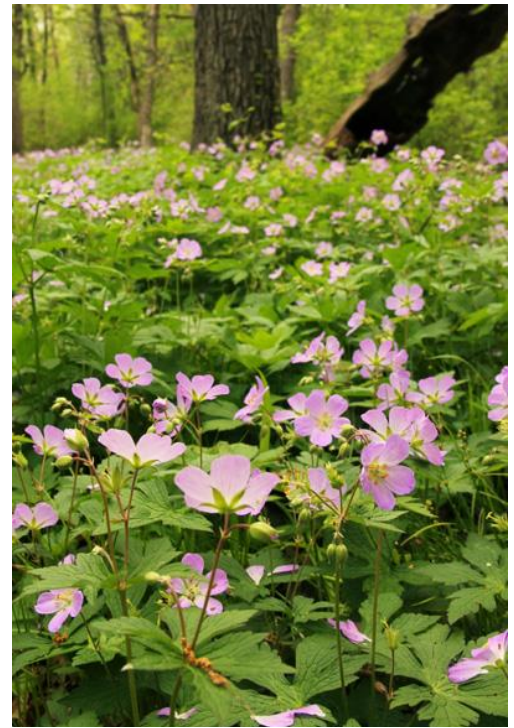
Exploring Native Ground Covers

By Jackie Algon

Along with the trees, shrubs, vines, perennials, annuals, and grasses which homeowners seek to enhance their property, ground covers offer special opportunities for wildlife, the landscape, and the environment.

Ground covers serve numerous purposes which may not be obvious. Some of these include:

- often being early to green-up and flower, providing pollinators nourishment when the pickings are slim in early Spring;
- providing protection and habitat for small mammals, insects and other wildlife;
- helping prevent erosion on slopes by holding the soil beneath in place, and growing well in irregular terrain;
- filtering groundwater as it enters the soil;
- offering landscape texture and design definition to the property while forming a barrier to weeds.



Wild cranesbill (*Geranium maculatum*)

While turf is often the preferred ground cover from its historic perception as the image of a well-heeled establishment, there are many better choices that can create visual interest and ensure value for wildlife, the environment and the health of our families.

Having a neatly mown green lawn may give the neighborhood an appearance of tidiness, but other than as a place for recreation, it offers little else. Pollinators and other insects cannot eat it or nest in it; water cannot easily penetrate it; its roots are shallow and cannot effectively filter groundwater; and in order to look bright green, many owners invest significant sums each growing season to treat it with amendments, herbicides and fertilizers, many of which have proven deleterious to the health of children and pets who play on it and to the purity of the water we drink when it drains into the water table.



If you are sticking with turf you can make it healthier by mowing it high (no less than 3 inches, trimming only the top third of the grass blade) using a cross-cutting blade on your mower, and leaving the clippings as fertilizer. If you do that, no other fertilizers are needed. Mowing for the first time of the season as late into May as tolerable can give time for ground nesting bees to hatch and

become active pollinators. And leaving to flower what traditionally have been scorned as weeds – violets, dandelions, ajuga – will bring early color at the end of Winter and offer food for the first Spring insects. Cutting only every other week will free-up time for the family member with mower duty, or can reduce

landscaper costs. Once cut, the grass will look green enough to satisfy most of us. The trick is to do less!

If you are feeling especially lazy and adventurous, mark off the least turf needed for your family's recreation and let the rest go untended for a season. You may be surprised - and pleased - to discover the number of native wildflowers that emerge from the seed bank to form a naturalized meadow.

If having a beautiful lawn seems the ultimate underpinning for 'keeping up with the neighbors', it's a good time to reevaluate and consider 'keeping up with the ecology'. If not grass, then *what?* There are many other ground covers to consider in planning and planting gardens that are novel to see and worthwhile for wildlife.

While we recommend planting natives, there are many non-native ground covers that also provide nutrition and shelter for insects and small mammals. Be sure not to include any invasive plants and you will be providing service to the environment.

Pachysandra procumbens, **the native evergreen pachysandra**, is a slower growing plant and less shiny than the commonly seen plant from Japan and Eastern China, *P. terminalis*. The native can tolerate the shade of large trees such as oaks. It contributes to completion of the lifecycle of many species of caterpillars/butterflies that leave the shelter of the tree canopy returning to ground to lay their eggs underground or on the leaves of this pachysandra and other native ground covers. Should you decide to replace your *P. terminalis*, dig down about 6" to release the roots and roll-up the plants like a carpet, leaving the loosened soil in place, ready for a replacement ground cover.



Wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*) is a shade-loving plant with roots that have a scent reminiscent of the culinary ginger, though it is not generally eaten today. Growing well in moist wooded areas, these heart-shaped, dark green leaves are about 2" wide and close to the ground with cup-shaped brownish-purple flowers 1" in diameter in Spring.

Another native ground cover is *Cornus canadensis*, a member of the Dogwood family. Commonly called **Bunchberry**, it spreads quickly in acidic soil and forms a 6"-8" cover of whorled leaves. It bears large white bracts that resemble flowers in early summer and clusters of bright red berries afterward. A wide range of wildlife relish this groundcover for its berries, stems and leaves.

Goldenstar, or Green and Gold (*Chrysogonum virginianum*), gets its name from the bright yellow, daisy-like flowers it bears in Spring and again in late Summer. Its foliage spreads slowly into a tight, low-growing ground cover that is 4"- 6" high. This native plant grows well in medium to full shade and likes a little morning sun; it cannot tolerate full sun. *C. virginianum* is an evergreen that grows well in acidic, organically rich moist soil, and can serve as edging or in rock gardens.

Wild cranesbill (*Geranium maculatum*) spreads both by seeding itself widely and by rhizomes. It grows on long stems and forms a dense cover of deeply lobed gray-green deciduous leaves that are 18"-24" tall. In early spring, blue flowers appear in loose clusters facing up, above the leaves. Easily grown in acidic soil with some sun or light shade, it resists insects and spreads quickly.

Creeping phlox, or moss phlox, has low-growing clusters of small, evergreen leaves with shades of pink, blue, or white flowers. Rising above the foliage on thin stems in Spring, they give the appearance of a mat of flowers floating above the ground. This is a native perennial that is lovely cascading over slopes and garden walls.

Arctostaphylos uva-ursi 'Massachusetts', commonly called bearberry, is an evergreen herbaceous perennial low-growing and slow-growing shrub that loves acidic conditions and part shade to full sun. It reaches 1' in height and 3' to 6' in width and has white blooms in April to May. Bearberry bears fruit in clusters in August to September; these are edible, though not tasty to humans yet adored by bears, birds and small mammals.

Pussytoes (*Antennaria plantaginifolia*) grow close to the ground and spread through rhizomes in dry areas such as rock gardens. They are generally preferred for their fuzzy, velvety leaves, rather than their gray-white or red flowers which bloom on stalks about 1' high.



Canada anemone, meadow anemone or roundleaf anemone (*Anemone canadensis*) is an herbaceous, native perennial of the buttercup family. They spread rapidly by rhizomes in meadows, thickets and along shores of lakes and streams and can form mats quickly. Producing white upward-facing flowers with yellow stamens, *A. canadensis* blooms can be up to two inches in diameter. The flowers appear from April-June on erect stems that can reach 2' in height. The leaves are

deeply cut, sharply-toothed and are stalkless, lying close enough to the ground to avoid a properly set lawn mower!

Dwarf crested iris (*Iris cristata*) grows 4"-9" tall and can form mats in peaty woodland settings. Perennials, they are excellent for rock gardens and partly shaded areas, offering one or two violet to light blue flowers in early spring.

Groundsel, ragwort, squaw weed (*Packera spp*) is a collection of 60+ species that are perennials and members of the Aster family. They spread rapidly and naturalize in moist shady locations. *Packera* send up a flower stem that bears a long and profuse yellow spring bloom with bright, round, black seeds.



Mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum*) is a favorite for turtles, bearing its inverted flowers and fruit beneath 12"-18"-high foliage. A native plant, Mayapples are herbaceous and form large clusters in a woodland setting. *P. peltatum* is the sole species of *Podophyllum* that are members of the barberry family. Infertile plants have a single leaf from a long stalk and fertile plants produce two leaves at the end of the stalk.

Bellwort or Merrybells (*Uvularia grandiflora*) is a native wildflower of Eastern and Central North America that forms clumps and grows to 2' in height. It sends out a bell-shaped yellow flower that is about 1.5" long with six tepals which look like petals. The bright green leaves are lance-shaped and twist around the stem.

And, don't forget **ferns!** Sensitive fern, maidenhair fern, Lady fern, New York fern and ostrich fern are all natives and provide linear structure in the garden while offering shelter to wildlife and quickly creating wide clusters of ground cover.

