

Edible Cover Crops

Arctostaphylos uva-ursi: Bearberry is an evergreen shrub growing about 4 inches eventually 1 yard wide. A good plant for sunny banks, it requires an acid soil. The fruit is edible.

Asarum canadense: This low-growing herbaceous species does well in a woodland, it is also good under shrubs in the garden. It requires a humus-rich soil. The root can be used as a ginger substitute. *A. caudatum*, *A. europaeum* and *A. shuttleworthii* can be used in the same way.

Campanula poscharskyana: A low-growing evergreen herbaceous plant, this lovely little Harebell spreads very rapidly to form a very good cover in a sunny position. The mild-flavored leaves can be harvested all year round to be used in salads. *C. portenschlagiana* can be used similarly, we do not yet know if this species is deciduous or evergreen.

Chamaemelum nobile: Chamomile is a delightful herb to grow in the garden, the cultivar 'Treneague' is a non-flowering form that remains compact and spreads slowly to form a good ground cover in a sunny position (it is sometimes used as a lawn). It needs quite a bit of weeding until it is established, and occasional weeding even when established. Chamomile is a superb companion plant, enhancing the health of plants growing close to it. Many species of bulbs grow well through the chamomile.

Chrysosplenium alternifolium: Golden saxifrage is a native perennial for the bog garden. It prefers a shady position, doing well in wet woodland. About 1 foot tall, it but is acceptable after a frost. Most other members of this genus can be used in a similar way.

Fragaria species: There are many species of strawberry that can be used for ground cover. Some of them have exquisitely flavored fruits, though they are somewhat smaller than the cultivated strawberries and are often not borne freely. My favourites are *F. moschata* and *F. viridis*. They grow best in a sunny position in a well-drained soil but do tolerate some shade. They spread very freely by runners, quickly forming a dense mass of vegetation and swamping out any small plants. *F. virginiana* creeps slowly to form a good carpet. The leaves are nice in salads. *F. vesca* is a similar species with the same uses.

Cornus canadensis: Creeping dogwood is a perennial that grows well in light acid woodlands, including amongst conifers. The fruit has a pleasant taste though it is not highly flavored. *C. suecica*, the dwarf cornel, has similar uses.

Empetrum nigrum: The crowberry is a native evergreen shrub growing about 1 foot tall and spreading slowly. It requires an acid soil and does well in exposed positions. The fruit is not highly flavored

Gaultheria shalloni: Shallon is an evergreen shrub that grows about 1.2 yards tall. It does well in acid soils and under coniferous trees. The fruit is very freely borne and has a pleasant flavor. *G. procumbens*, Wintergreen, only grows about 6 inches tall and spreads fairly quickly in moist acid soils in shade or semi-shade. The fruit has a remarkable flavor, tasting like germolene - some people love it, others are less sure! An essential oil from this plant is used in the linament 'Oil of Wintergreen'.

Hosta species: Most, if not all, hostas can be used for ground cover. They vary in height and width and all do well in woodland conditions (where they produce better foliage but don't flower so well) as well as in sunny positions (where they flower better but the leaves can get scorched). The plants are rather susceptible to slug damage. The petioles (leaf stems) can be eaten raw or cooked, they are somewhat fibrous but have a sweet flavor.

Houttuynia cordata: This is a rampant-growing herbaceous plant, though it dies right down in the winter. It succeeds in moist and wet soils as well as in shallow water. The leaves have a very strong scent of oranges and can be used in salads. Sometimes they have a pleasant flavor, at other times the same plants are not so pleasant. We are not sure of the reasons for this. There are a number of very ornamental forms with multi-coloured leaves.

Liriope graminifolia: This evergreen perennial is about 30cm tall. It is rather slow to spread but eventually forms a good dense cover in a shady position and is drought tolerant. We have not yet tried eating this species, but the root is said to be eaten in China and Japan, where it is also used medicinally. Other members of this genus can also be used.

Mahonia aquifolium: Oregon grape is a very easily grown evergreen shrub about 1.5 yards tall that tolerates most soils and positions, even dense shade. It spreads slowly by suckers. The plant produces edible flowers in late winter, the fruit is ripe in late summer and, though somewhat acid and full of seeds, is quite pleasant eating. *M. repens* is very similar but lower growing and spreading more rapidly.

Montia sibirica: Pink purslane is a short-lived evergreen perennial about 8 inches tall that self-sows freely and forms a dense ground cover. It can succeed in sunny positions and even in the dense shade of a beech wood. The leaves can be eaten in salads.

Origanum vulgare: Oreganum is a very dense growing plant for sunny positions, it makes a good ground cover though it is slow to spread. An excellent flavoring for cooked foods and salads, it is also a very good companion plant and is said to repel insect pests. The sub-species *O. vulgare hirtum* comes from Greece and is more aromatic.

Peltaria alliacea: Garlic cress tastes just like its name suggests. The plant is evergreen and the leaves can be used as a flavoring in salads or cooked foods, though it turns more bitter in the summer. The plant is about 8 inches tall and spreads slowly. It prefers a light soil and a sunny position.

Prunus laurocerasus: Cherry laurel is an easily grown evergreen shrub succeeding in sun or in the dense shade of trees and in most well-drained soils except shallow chalk. It can have a negative effect on nearby plants, however, and I would only use it under mature trees. Some low-growing forms such as 'Otto Luyken' make good ground cover plants. The very ripe fruit has a pleasant flavor and can be eaten in moderation, though some reports say that it is poisonous. An almond flavoring can be distilled from the leaves.

Pulmonaria officinalis: Lungwort is an evergreen perennial about 1 foot tall, growing best in the light shade of a woodland. It is slow to spread but makes a good weed-excluding carpet of vegetation. It is sometimes cultivated as a medicinal herb, the bland-flavored leaves can be added to salads.

Rubus species: There are several members of this genus that can be grown for ground cover in sun or light shade and can also provide edible fruits. Our favourite is *R. nepalensis*, the Nepalese raspberry and *R. pentalobus* the Taiwan raspberry. This evergreen plant is only about 6 inches tall but spreads freely to form a good carpet. The fruit is ripe from late July to September, somewhat smaller than the cultivated raspberry it has a pleasant acid flavor. Best in light shade, it will often be deciduous in exposed positions and is not hardy in the colder parts of the country. *R. illecebrosus*, the strawberry raspberry has a large fruit that looks delicious but is rather bland. The plant is about 6 inches tall, it spreads freely but dies down in winter. Other species worth trying include *R. calycinoides*, *R. parvus* and *R. tricolor* (this last species is very vigorous and should not be used with small plants).

Sedum species: There are many members of this genus that can be used as low ground cover for sunny positions. They are all very drought tolerant, growing well on hot dry banks, and all the species mentioned here are evergreen. Their leaves are edible raw or cooked, but they are not the most appetizing leaves I've ever eaten. The following are worth trying. *S. acre*, *S. album*, *S. spathulifolium* and *S. spurium*

Thymus species: The Thymes make very good ground cover in well-drained sunny positions, they are very drought tolerant. Regular consumption of the leaves is said to prolong your life by increasing the life of the body's cells. The following species can be added to salads or cooked foods - *T. praecox*, *T. serpyllum*, *T. vulgaris* and *T. x citriodorus*. This last, the lemon thyme, is my personal favourite, the leaves have a lovely lemon flavor.

Vaccinium vitis-idaea: The cowberry is an evergreen shrub for acid soils. It succeeds in full sun or in light shade in a coniferous woodland. Rather slow at first, it will eventually be about 1 foot tall and up to 3 feet wide. The acid flavored fruit, which is said to taste better after a frost, is used like cranberries. *V. praestans* is a deciduous member of the genus with a fairly large delicious fruit that tastes somewhat like a strawberry. It is about 6 inches tall, spreading slowly by suckers, and growing well in a moist acid soil in a shady position.

Viola species: Several members of this genus can be used in sunny positions. They have mild-flavored edible leaves and flowers, these are quite mucilaginous and can be used as thickeners in soups and stews in much the same way as okra is used. The following are worth trying. *V. cornuta*, *V. labradorica* and *V. obliqua*.