

IMA Q/A's: Native Plants for Dry Shade

By Greg Sykes (greg@grsykes.com)

Q: My yard has a dry shady area where we recently removed [English ivy](#). What are some good native plants to use there?

A: Before replanting, pull all of the little English ivy roots which snapped off since they can regenerate into a new vine. Remain vigilant in the coming years for ivy reemergence. Prune mature, hardwood shade tree branches so that they are at least 10-12 feet above the ground. If needed, amend the soil with a light layer of compost or leaf mulch. Do not build up the soil around trees, avoid using wood-based mulch in gardens except maybe for paths, and never pile mulch “volcanoes” around tree trunks—a detrimental habit perpetuated by many gardeners and professional landscapers. A properly maintained native plant garden will eventually conceal any tree roots emerging above the soil, especially those from maples and sycamores.

Now we can fill the properly conditioned dry, shady garden bed with suitable native species. Tiny, slow-growing partridgeberry (*Mitchella repens*) offers year-round interest and is the Virginia Native Plant Society's 2012 wildflower of the year. Blooming in late spring, this evergreen vine has two, white floral forms which need to be cross-pollinated to produce viable fruit. The mature red berries persist into late winter if they are not already eaten by wildlife. Staying below an inch or two above the ground, this plant fills bare garden spots. It may be tough to get started, but is a hardy species once established. Partridgeberry loves dry soil and fairs poorly in wet areas. Another small native spreader is the green-and-gold or goldenstar (*Chrysogonum virginianum*). In the spring, this evergreen blooms in yellow profusion, then a blossom or two might be spotted through the rest of the growing months. This species is available at most nurseries. A larger evergreen with yellow, spring flowers is golden groundsel or golden ragwort (*Packera aurea*). This versatile native was already covered in last month's article, [The Spring Edition of “What's That Plant?”](#) Fringed bleeding hearts (*Dicentra eximia*) reach only a foot tall and produce smaller blossoms than the Asian, fast-spreading, “old-fashioned bleeding-heart” (*Lamprocapnos spectabilis*). Whereas the Asian variety is a spring ephemeral, the native bleeding heart blooms strong April through November. Wild petunias (*Ruellia caroliniensis*) add blue morning blooms throughout the summer.

For ornamental foliage, gardeners value Allegheny spurge (*Pachysandra procumbens*)—an evergreen native to the mid-Atlantic but not to Northern Virginia. Allegheny spurge forms easily controlled clumps and is an excellent substitute for the non-native invasive Chinese Pachysandra. Christmas fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*) is another verdant option. Early settlers wove the evergreen, two-foot-long fronds into Christmas wreaths. Hardy native sedges (*Carex* sp.) add textural interest.

For additional recommendations, visit <http://www.wildflower.org/plants/>. With a little more looking, you will discover how many natives can fill that dry shade void! Plant assorted species in the new garden for



Figure 1. Groundcover species in this Fairfax, VA, dry shade native garden include A) green-and-golds, B) Allegheny spurge, C) partridgeberry, and D) wild petunias.

maximum visual interest and enriched wildlife habitat. Water the plants until they are established. In the autumn, allow the husks to stay in place and let the tree leaves remain where they fall. Thin leaf litter layers (e.g., what naturally falls in forested plots) provide excellent compost and root protection; depending on the plot's exposure, the dried stems and branches help prevent the moist leaves from blowing away just as they stay put on the forest floor.

Q: Where can I purchase native plants?

A: Many people wonder about that question, so here is a table of some local businesses and organizations offering either exclusive mid-Atlantic native plants or have a dedicated section for them. This list is informational only and is neither an endorsement nor all-inclusive. Many of these vendors appear at plant sales, such as the ones hosted at Green Springs Gardens and Parkfairfax. Nurseries lacking distinct native sections or stocks huge quantities of non-native invasive weeds do not appear on this list.

Company	Contact	Comments
Earth Sangha	http://earthsangha.org/	Fairfax, VA. Seed-grown Fairfax County natives; wholesale nursery, public sales on select days.
Long Branch Nature Center	http://www.arlingtonva.us/departments/parksrecreation/scripts/nature/parksrecreationscriptsnaturelongbranch.aspx	Arlington, VA. Hosts Virginia native plant sales several times a year. They propagate most of the plants.
Morningside Farm and Nursery	http://www.morningsidefarmandnursery.com/home.htm	Boston, VA. Has non-natives, but are expanding mid-Atlantic native department. Formerly a vendor at the Burke Farmers' Market.
Mostly Edibles	(no website; e-mail pfried@hers.com)	Alexandria, VA. Large selection of fruit-bearing shrubs.
Nature By Design	http://www.nature-by-design.com/	Alexandria, VA. Many species of mid-Atlantic natives.
Virginia Native Plant Society (VNPS)	http://www.vnps-pot.org/	Virginia native perennials, shrubs, and trees sold twice a year at Green Spring Gardens plant sales.

For more information on these vendors or see an expanded list including businesses further away from the D.C. area, visit www.grsykes.com/pdf/native_vendors1.pdf.

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