

## Invasive Species Profile: Periwinkle (*Vinca minor*)

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**Native Range:** Europe

**U.S. Introduction:** 1700s

**Life Cycle:** evergreen perennial

**Means of Spreading:** rapid vine growth

**Commercially Available:** yes

**Control Method:** hand-pull, may use garden knife to loosen soil near roots; repeatedly mow large plots

**Good Alternative Species:** wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*), woodland phlox (*Phlox divaricata*), prairie phlox (*P. pilosa*), moss phlox (*P. subulata*)

### **Comments:**

Fond of the purple spring flowers and dark, evergreen leaves, people imported periwinkle to America during the eighteenth century. Periwinkle proved so hardy and easily grown under many conditions that folks used it on low-maintenance areas, such as graveyards. Some archeologists even seek living *Vinca* plots when hunting for lost burial ground and homestead sites!

These days, people usually apply periwinkle monocultures as unoriginal groundcovers. Without natural predators, parasites, or diseases to manage periwinkle, this vine can get out of control. In a garden setting, periwinkle earned its invasive reputation by spreading quickly and overtaking other low-lying plants. Likewise, *Vinca* effortlessly escapes cultivation when the vines creep out of gardens and cross into natural areas. Invasive Management Area (IMA) volunteers found periwinkle mats that neighbors unfortunately threw upside down onto parkland. Instead of dying and rotting, new periwinkle shoots grew from and flourished throughout this pile! While the volunteers sent that mess to an incinerator, please remember never to dump yard waste into the parks or other public land for any reason. Elsewhere in Royal Lake Park, IMA volunteers already eradicated periwinkle infestations from three long-established plots. Pulling and bagging the weeds is the most effective disposal method. Former periwinkle sites



**Figure 1. Lesser or dwarf periwinkle blooms in early spring.**



**Figure 2. Periwinkle continues smothering woodlands through fallen leaves and melting snow in this mid-winter photograph of a Royal Lake Park IMA site before volunteers cleared this plight.**



**Figure 3. One of the many excellent native alternatives is woodland phlox. Pictured here, blooming wild type clusters stand on 10-inch-tall stems.**

need monitoring to remove sprouts from root remnants. Periwinkle should never be composted unless it is completely dried and killed first.

Folks wanting an ornamental substitute to this cemetery weed have many options. For shade, consider wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*, unrelated to the ginger spice). Come spring, look carefully at ground level for its burgundy, ant-pollinated flowers. Wild ginger produces a richly foliated groundcover during the growing season. Many *Phlox* species grace the forest floor with purple or pinkish spring-time flowers. Woodland phlox (*P. divaricata*) is best suited in shaded or partly sunny locations while hardy moss phlox (*P. subulata*) prefers sunny areas and loves rocky soil. Prairie phlox (*P. pilosa*) likes sun to partial shade; its pink blossoms open in mid-spring. While the above-mentioned plants are all Fairfax County natives, creeping phlox (*P. stolonifera*) is a tough, evergreen vine found in Virginia's mountains. Throughout the year, all of these species get along with other plants to both protect against erosion and provide a beautiful, ecologically healthy landscape. Check [this list](#) for some native nurseries stocking these alternatives.

Learn more about periwinkle:

Invasive weed information:

<http://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/vine/vinspp/all.html>

<http://www.invasiveplantatlas.org/subject.html?sub=3081>

[http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/cs/groups/public/documents/document/dcnr\\_010310.pdf](http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/cs/groups/public/documents/document/dcnr_010310.pdf)

<http://www.gardeningknowhow.com/ornamental/groundcover/periwinkle/periwinkle-control-methods.htm>

Periwinkle as a graveyard plant:

- Henry County Historical Society (VA). 1982. *Follow the Periwinkle: Cemetery Records of Henry County, Virginia*: <http://www.worldcat.org/title/follow-the-periwinkle-cemetery-records-of-henry-county-virginia/oclc/8549891>
- Hobbs, Holly. November 20, 2012. Preservation group discovers Fairfax County's past as it cleans up graves: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/preservation-group-discovers-fairfax-countys-past-as-it-cleans-up-graves/2012/11/20/74e6f268-314d-11e2-9f50-0308e1e75445\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/preservation-group-discovers-fairfax-countys-past-as-it-cleans-up-graves/2012/11/20/74e6f268-314d-11e2-9f50-0308e1e75445_story.html)
- Plants as Site Indicators (especially cemetery sites): [https://www.deldot.gov/archaeology/beech\\_ridge/pdf/phase1\\_2/beech1\\_2\\_plants.pdf](https://www.deldot.gov/archaeology/beech_ridge/pdf/phase1_2/beech1_2_plants.pdf)

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