



Cultivation Notes

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PARTRIDGE-BERRY

Family RUBIACEAE

Mitchella repens L.

A Rhode Island Native Plant

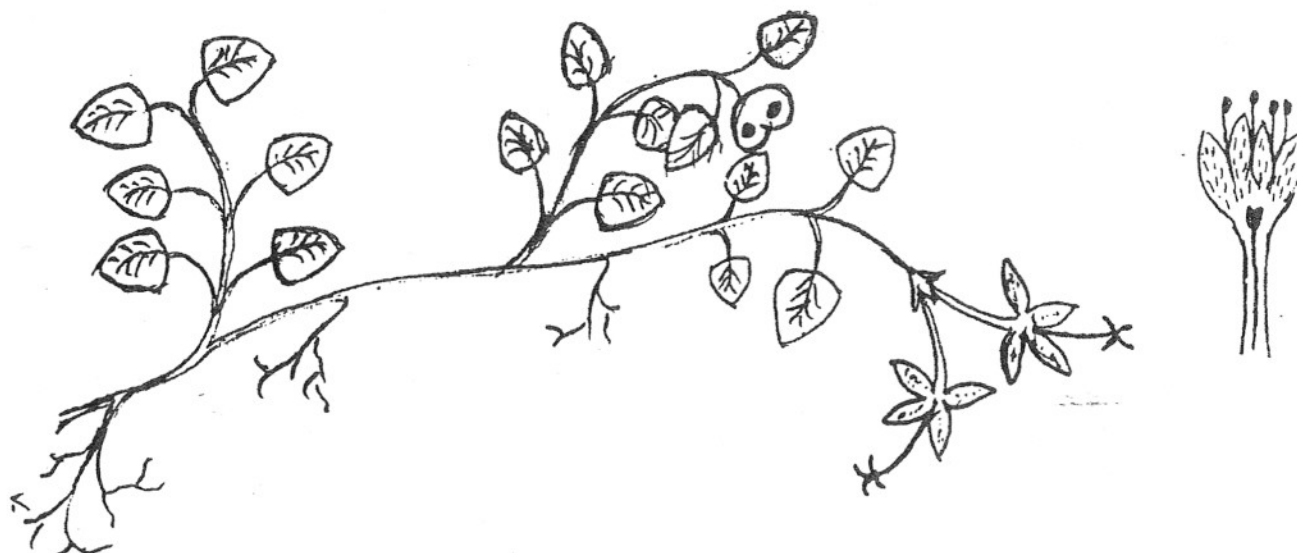
By Ann M(itchell) Seemann

Perhaps your first introduction to this lovely little groundcover was similar to mine. In fourth grade our class made a terrarium. I was so taken with the project that I made one for myself at home. All it took was an old fish bowl, a glass cover cut carefully by my father, some charcoal, sand, soil, moss, one rock, and a small planting of Partridge-berry. Cheeriness in a bowl.

Partridge-berry is a small, creeping, evergreen herb with leaves in pairs and tiny waxy, very fragrant flowers, usually white, but sometimes pale pink. The edible berries are wintergreen-scented and often last throughout the winter. The plant grows in mats which may be three feet across. Once established, Partridge-berry grows unhurriedly across the forest floor. It roots easily from the stem nodes. Partridge-berry likes acid, well-drained, moist, and humus-rich soil, preferably in the shade, although it can be established with care in drier soil.

The plant was named for Dr. John Mitchell (1711-1768) who was born in Virginia and died in England. Educated at the University of Edinburgh, he practiced medicine in his home state, but his leisure time was spent studying the local flora and fauna. He was a botanist and a map maker as well as a regular correspondent of Linnaeus.

Manasseh Cutler wrote, "the leaves are much celebrated by the common people as a diuretic and sweetener of the blood, but are of very little efficacy." Pregnant Native American women took frequent doses before giving birth, hence one of its thirty possible common names, "Squawvine".



CULTIVATION NOTES

Mitchella repens L. Partridge-berry

Perennial. Height: 1 inch. Flowering time: late spring. Fruiting time: Late summer to winter. Zones: 3-9. Leaves dark green, opposite, ovate-orbicular, and blunt at the apex, 1/4-7/8 inch long. Leaf veins may be white. Flowers very small, 1/4-1/2 inch. Flowers, with their funnel-shaped corollas, vary: some have stamens longer than the pistil, or vice versa. After pollination, the flower pairs fuse, and their two ovaries produce a single red drupe containing 4-8 nutlets.

Habitat:

Cool boreal and acid deciduous forest. Nova Scotia to Ontario and Minnesota, south to Florida, Arkansas, and Texas. Usually found in combination with mosses and lichens.

Propagation:

By division:

Cut a fairly large piece of mat from a leading tip. Roots are fragile, so work carefully. Plant in well drained soil, enriched with compost and peat moss. Keep cuttings moist until rooted. Will often bear flowers in the second year.

By seed:

Moist stratification at 40°F for at least 6 weeks. Plant 1/4 inch deep in mix of sand, compost, and peat moss. cover flats with 1/4 inch layer of pine needles and leave outdoors over the winter. Germination will occur in spring 2-3 weeks after the temperature gets above 60°F. Transplant seedlings in the fall.

Cultivation:

Best used in woodland gardens. Once established, the plants spread well into large mats. Prefers moist shade with humus-rich, well-drained, acid soil. Maximum growth in spring before temperatures reach 60°F.

Companion Plants:

Pink Lady's Slipper, Bloodroot, Bunchberry, Clintonia, Hepatica, and Canada Mayflower.

RIWPS Policy:

Never dig plants in the wild without written permission of the landowner.

**Never dig Partridge-berry from the wild.
Limit seed collection to 10 per cent or less of available fruits.**

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