

SUN-LOVING GROUND COVERS ADD TEXTURE TO THE LANDSCAPE

By **Douglas J. Chapman**, Horticulturist, Dow Gardens, Midland, MI

Last month we discussed shade-tolerant ground covers. Presently, I would like to review a representative group of woody ground covers which thrive in full sun. These deciduous ground covers include Cranberry, Creeping, and Rockspray Cotoneaster; Shrubby St. Johnswort, Northern Bayberry, and Lowbush Blueberry. Two sun-loving evergreen types would be junipers and a selected form of media yew.

Cotoneaster is a shrub ground cover which thrives in full sun, needing well-drained soil. Cotoneaster is a relative of apple (in the Rosaceae family) and is slightly susceptible to Fireblight and several insects, e.g. aphids and mites. In mass plantings or as individual species, Cranberry, Rockspray, and Creeping Cotoneaster can be outstanding as ground covers.

Cranberry Cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster apiculata*) is a low-spreading shrub with the ultimate height of 3 feet and a spread of 3 to 6 feet. It mounds on itself, being similar to *Juniperus sabin* 'Broadmoor.' It makes an impenetrable border. The leaves are dark glossy green throughout the summer, becoming a purplish-bronze during the fall. This fall color is effective for three to five weeks. The bright red fruit ($\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ inch in diameter) is particularly effective during August and September when contrasted with the dark green foliage. The only disadvantage with Cranberry Cotoneaster is its extreme susceptibility to aphids, thus requiring several sprays annually.

Creeping Cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster adpressa*) is a fine textured dwarf shrub, 1 to 1½ feet in height with an ultimate spread of 4 to 6 feet. Where branches come in contact with fertile soil, it will layer and root as will most cotoneasters. The $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch diameter dark red fruit looks very attractive against the glossy green summer leaves. Creeping Cotoneaster is an exciting ground cover in Ohio and southern Michigan and is less effective in central Michigan. Further, Dirr has reported that it is not a good performer in central Illinois.

Rockspray Cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster horizontalis*) has been the standard cotoneaster ground cover. It is somewhat mounding, reaching 2 to 3 feet in height with a spread of 3 to 5 feet. The summer foliage is, again, a bright glossy dark green, becoming a dull purple during the fall months. The bright red fruit is approximately $\frac{1}{5}$ inch in diameter, being particularly effective during September and October. Rockspray Cotoneaster is considerably more prostrate than *C. apiculata* and has slightly smaller leaves. Generally speaking, it is not as aggressive as the other two types and is more susceptible to Fireblight.

Each horticulturist will have his own favorite cotoneaster. Certainly in central Michigan, *C. apiculata* has to rank on the top when considering the cotoneaster types. *Cotoneaster horizontalis* would rank second, being finer, less aggressive, and slightly more prone to Fireblight than the *apiculata* type. *Cotoneaster adpressa* is unique and interesting but will rank last when considering these three types. Cotoneaster is extremely effective when used in mass plantings or as single specimen ground covers. Generally speaking, cotoneaster is not a good companion plant with large or small trees.

Shrubby **St. Johnswort** (*Hypericum prolificum*) is the hardiest and most effective of the Hypericums. St. Johnswort is a small, dense, round shrub, 2 to 4 feet in height and spread. Its stems are erect yet stiff, giving it a very structured feeling. The summer foliage is dark lustrous green, becoming bluish-green late in the season. The flowers are usually a bright yellow (buttercup-like), $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 inch in diameter, and are borne in a terminal and axillary position. They are particularly effective during June and July. St. Johnswort does extremely well when planted in dry, gravelly soils in full sun. It is adaptable to a large range in pH but seems to thrive in calcareous soils. The one maintenance consideration is that St. Johnswort should be pruned vigorously each and every spring.

Northern Bayberry (*Myrica pensylvanica*) is a semi-evergreen "deciduous shrub" with an upright, rounded habit of growth. It spreads by underground stolons, making it particularly effective as a low to medium range ground cover. Although it has been reported to reach 9 feet in height, in central Michigan it is uncommon to see this exciting lustrous, dark green, leathery leaf ground cover reach over 3 feet in height. It flowers in early to mid May before the leaves appear. The small, gray fruit, which cling to the stems, adds texture during the winter but isn't colorful. The most exciting considerations include the density which this plant can attain and its ability to not only adapt but thrive in gravelly, poor, well-drained soils. *Myrica pensylvanica* not only has a long history of use in the landscape and for candles but has an added bonus—when one rubs the foliage between the fingers, the aroma left behind is exciting.

Lowbush Blueberry (*Vaccinium angustifolium*) is a low straggly shrub, reaching 8 to 12 inches in height and with an 18 to 24 inch spread. Leaves are a lustrous green in summer, changing to a bronze-scarlet during the fall. The white

Continues on page 32

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Ground Covers from page 30

flowers are ¼ inch long, appearing in racemes during mid to late May. Edible fruit is a bluish-black, ¼ to ½ inch across. Lowbush Blueberry has not been used to any great extent in the landscape, but with the development of a new cultivar by Michigan State University, its potential seems to have increased. The new cultivar, *V. angustifolium* 'Tophat,' seems to be an aggressive ground cover, fruits heavily, and will thrive in sunny locations.

Several of the evergreen ground covers worth considering include several cultivars of Horizontal and Savin Juniper and *X Taxus media* 'Chadwickii.'

Junipers thrive in conditions from well-drained to medium soils. They are particularly effective and vigorous when grown in full sun locations. Some of the *Juniperus horizontalis* types can quickly become dense, exciting ground covers. They are good when used in conjunction with rock gardens, foundation plantings, or mass areas for bank erosion control where mowing would be difficult. There are many cultivars of Creeping Juniper which are extremely susceptible to disease; therefore, I shall only discuss three cultivars which show good tolerance to *Phomopsis* twig blight.

Juniperus horizontalis 'Douglasii' is a very horizontal and rapid growing ground cover. It reaches 12 to 18 inches in height and 6 to 8 feet in width. The blue-green foliage of summer often turns somewhat purplish through the winter months, adding additional color to the landscape.

Juniperus horizontalis 'Emerald Spreader' is a low growing, prostrate form rarely reaching over 6 to 8 inches in height. It has a brilliant mint-green foliage year-round and is an exciting addition to the general landscape.

Juniperus horizontalis 'Wiltoni' or 'Blue Rug' is a very horizontal form, reaching 6 to 8 inches in height with a spread of 6 to 8 feet. Its foliage is an intense silver-blue, becoming a purplish-blue-green during the fall. Once established, this plant can grow quite rapidly.

Of the Savin Juniper types, *Juniperus sabina* 'Broadmoor' is the most exciting. It is a dwarf, low-spreading shrub which tends to build up from the center with age, developing a unique mounded habit. The color in early season is a brilliant mint-green, becoming a soft gray-green during summer, fall, and winter.

There are many exciting yews, but one yew ground cover which is well adapted to the Midwest that does not break down under heavy snow and holds its rich light green color throughout the winter is *X Taxus media* 'Chadwickii.' 'Chadwick' Yew is a low-spreading type, reaching 3 to 4 feet in height. It is low growing and, therefore, a relatively low maintenance regal ground cover. **WTT**



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