

# LOOKING FOR GREEN IN THE DEPTHS OF WINTER

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A drop of color amongst the browns and grays of winter can be a real relief to the eye and the spirit. Walking in our woods, you can sometimes find a glimpse of something that is surprisingly evergreen or even bright red.



*Christmas Fern*

Christmas fern (*Polystichum acrosticoides*) is one of our evergreen ferns. This time of year, most of the fronds will be lying flat, but in a nice, round clump. The leaflets (or pinnae in fern talk) are glossy green with a little tooth near the base. Some say that the plant is called Christmas fern because a pinna has the shape of Santa on his sleigh. It's a cute story but the fern probably got this name because it remains green through Christmas time and beyond. The newly reopened Trail 2 in the State Park has an abundance of this fern between the Wilson Shelter and the long boardwalk.

Try Christmas fern in your garden for some evergreen color. It does well in a wide variety of soil types provided there is some organic material in the immediate planting area. Shade or part shade will be best for it. The Missouri Botanic Garden says that it is good for planting on slopes to avoid soil erosion, an excellent feature for those with dune properties. This is not surprising because of the frequency in nature in which you see the Christmas fern growing on a wooded slope. Christmas fern is widely available from mail order and nurseries.



*Wintergreen*

Wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*), has a delightful scent when a leaf is crushed. In the early winter, plants bear bright red fruit below their elongate, oval leaves. The wintergreen flavor you may be familiar with from products like Clarks Teaberry Gum (teaberry is another name for wintergreen) or Wrigley's "Winterfresh" flavor gum, originally came from this plant. Later scientists were able to reproduce the flavor in a laboratory.

According to the Missouri Botanical Garden, wintergreen is an "excellent ground cover for shady areas, woodland gardens, rock gardens, foundations or native plant areas." It is available for sale from many online nurseries (and recently seen for sale in large pots at Lowes in Michigan City).



*Partridgeberry*

Another evergreen leaf with a red berry you might find in the woods this winter is partridgeberry (*Mitchella repens*). Partridgeberry is a very low-growing, creeping plant with tiny, round leaves in pairs. Occasionally you will find a bright red berry at the base of the leaf pair. Partridgeberry also is available for sale, chiefly by mail order.

I don't have experience growing either wintergreen or partridgeberry as ornamentals so I can't say how long it will be before they begin to produce those pretty red berries, but I plan to try them soon.

The Environmental Restoration Group (ERG) will be glad to help identify plants for you and make suggestions for removal of invasives and for native replacements. Don't hesitate to contact Terry Bonace ([tbonace@gmail.com](mailto:tbonace@gmail.com)) or Candice Smith ([candicepetersonsmith@gmail.com](mailto:candicepetersonsmith@gmail.com)) for assistance. Also please visit our website at [www.bserg.org](http://www.bserg.org) for further information on native and non-native plants.