

Asarum canadense (Wild Ginger)

Botanical Bytes by Bruner

By Gregory Bruner

Foliage Height: 4-6"
Foliage Width: 12-24"
Flower Height: 1-2"
Foliage Color: Green
Flower Color: Maroon / Brown
USDA Hardiness: 3-7
Moisture: Average – Moist
Light: Part Shade – Shade



The snow had melted and a warming breeze whispered in my ear as my boots crunched through the leaves, stirring up memories of a little gem I had found the previous spring. The Little Brown Jug had disappeared when the leaves had fallen from the trees of this woodland paradise. I smiled as I spotted it emerging from the ground—its velvety leaves soaking up the warmth of the spring sun.

Asarum canadense is known by many names throughout its favored growing region, which spans most of the North American continent. Little Brown Jug, Canadian Snakeroot, and Wild Ginger are some of the most common names given to this woodland creeper.

The conditions preferred by Wild Ginger are typical of many of the woodland wildflowers. Deciduous forests with a rich, well-drained soil with a tendency to be on the moist side are best. When conditions are ideal, *Asarum canadense* can become a wonderful ground cover. A shade garden that has been amended well is perfect as long as it does not get too dry. If you want to give it a little extra TLC, make sure the pH is slightly on the acidic side.

This unique little flower presents itself to the world in mid to late spring. The maroon brown urn-shaped flower is hidden by the leaves and is aesthetically unimpressive. Flowers are pollinated by flies and beetles, while industrious ants enjoy carrying the seeds off when they are ripe, which helps transport the seeds away from the parent plant.

Wild Ginger has the honor of being a host for the larvae of the Pipevine Swallowtail. The butterflies lay their eggs on the leaves, which become a food source for the hungry hatching caterpillars. Any leafy family member that attracts Swallowtails is a good choice for my shade garden.

So is this *Asarum canadense* the ginger of culinary fame? Unfortunately it is not, although it does have many great attributes. A liquid distilled from the roots is called Canadian Snake Oil by some. It has a spicy odor and flavor very reminiscent of the true ginger.

When processed correctly, the root is incredibly versatile. American Indians used it to treat everything from sore throats and headaches to scarlet fever and dysentery. If roasted slightly, the roots can be ground up and the powder used as a perfume. Flavoring from root extracts has been used in teas, ice cream, and a plethora of other culinary adventures.

Wild Ginger is a great plant for the home gardener. Whether you are adventurous in the garden or in the kitchen, there are plenty of interesting ways to enjoy this woodland creeper.