

VIRGINIA CREEPER

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Virginia creeper is an attractive native vine needing little care to flourish. It can be a valuable ornamental during the warm months of the year because of its ability to cover a bare surface quickly with green foliage. It can cling to bare walls, trees, and other structures by means of tendrils without any other support. In the fall, the leaves turn to spectacular shades of orange and red, and during the cold weather of winter, the vines lose their leaves. These characteristics make it useful as insulation on a wall facing the sun in the warm months, and because it is deciduous, it permits direct exposure to warming sun in the winter.

Virginia creeper, *Parthenocissus quinquefolia*, Planch., is a high-climbing woody vine in the Grape Family, taking its name from the Greek words *parthenos*, meaning virgin, and *cissos*, meaning ivy. This

“virgin ivy” gradually became Virginia Creeper, by which we now know the plant. The species name *quinquefolia*, means five-leaved, which is the usual number of leaflets on each leaf.

This native plant ranges from Quebec and the northeastern United States across to Minnesota, south to Texas, Florida, Cuba, Bermuda, and the Bahamas. It grows along fences, in ditches, disturbed areas, moist hammocks and woods, and frequently occurs in rocky areas. It can be found and cultivated throughout Florida in all but the driest of soils.

Virginia creeper climbs by means of specialized branches (tendrils) with adhesive disks at the tips, which occur at each node or joint of the stem. The leaves are alternate on the stem and palmately compound with three to seven leaflets. Each leaflet

has a stalk and can be up to 15 cm long and 3 cm wide. The leaflets are pointed at each end and have large teeth on the margins toward the tip. Sometimes hairs occur on the underside of the leaflets. In the fall the foliage turns various shades of orange, maroon, and red. It can make a gorgeous display if the vine is used as a climber.

Large bunches (panicles) of small yellowish-green flowers occur at the branch tips. The five petals are no more than 2 to 3 mm long. The dark blue or black fruits are 5 to 9 mm in diameter and contain one to three seeds. Flowering is from January until August in the southern counties of Florida, and from April to June northwards. Fruiting is from June to September in the northern part of the state and extends into November in the south. Neither the flowering nor the fruiting is showy. The fruits are considered poisonous to humans.

Virginia creeper can be used to cover walls, fences, arbors, and the lower trunks of large trees. It also can be used as a ground cover, but it usually isn't very dense. Since the vine will climb even when you want it to be only a ground cover, it must be trimmed away from trees, walls, and other upright objects. It will withstand shade.

Propagation can be by seeds or cuttings. Frequently long runners are found on the ground. These are stems that have not found anything on which to climb. Any portion of these stems containing two or more sections can be used for propagation. Simply clip out a section of the stem, take it to the new location, and plant under a light covering of soil. The soil should be moist and contain mixed organic matter.

Treat yourself to a bright colorful display next fall by planting this native in your landscape.