Trailside Nature

Wintergreens
Spotted or Not

By Edna Greig

Several species of low-growing evergreen plants native to our area add interest to the forest floor in winter. Two of these—wintergreen and spotted wintergreen—are widespread and easily found, especially when there is little to no snow cover to hide them.

Wintergreen

Wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*) is a ground-hugging shrub that grows up to six inches tall. Its oval, leathery, aromatic leaves are up to two inches long and grow in rounded clusters. It primarily reproduces vegetatively, by sending out thin horizontal stems just below the soil surface, and can form large clumps.

Wintergreen is common in dry, usually acid soils of oak and conifer woods. It's a member of the heath (*Ericaceae*) family, as are mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) and blueberry (*Vaccinium* species), and the three species often are found together.

Although wintergreen primarily reproduces vegetatively, it also reproduces via seed. In summer, the plants, especially those in brighter locations, have bell-shaped, white flowers. Fertilized flowers develop into pea-sized berries that mature to a bright red by October. Each berry contains up to 80 seeds. The berries are of poor nutritional quality and are not a first food choice of animals, so they usually remain on the shrub through winter.

Wintergreen (Gaultheria procumbens)

Wintergreen was the original natural source of oil of wintergreen, used in beverages and candies. It later was found that the bark of black or sweet birch (*Betula lenta*) was a more productive source of oil of wintergreen. Try crushing a black birch twig to release the pleasant wintergreen scent. Today, oil of wintergreen is produced synthetically.

The red berries of wintergreen give it another common name—teaberry. Both the berries and leaves were used by Native Americans and settlers to brew a tasty tea. Clark's Teaberry Chewing Gum, introduced in the early 1900s, got its unique flavor from the plant and became quite popular. If you were around in the 1960s, you might remember the Clark Teaberry Shuffle television commercials, in which the refreshing gum spurred people to do a little dance to the music of Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass.

Spotted Wintergreen

Spotted wintergreen (*Chimaphila maculata*) also grows in dry woodlands. Although not as common as wintergreen, it's easily identified. It grows three to nine inches tall and has conspicuous, whitish-veined, dark green, pointed leaves that are one to three inches long. The leaves aren't aromatic. Spotted wintergreen blooms in summer with white or pinkish flowers atop tall stalks. Dry, roundish seed capsules mature by October and may persist through winter. The capsules contain copious amounts of dust-like seeds. The seeds have a very low germination rate, so spotted wintergreen, like wintergreen, relies upon vegetative reproduction.

Spotted wintergreen (Chimaphila maculata)

The genus name, *Chimaphila*, means "loves winter," which seems appropriate for this little evergreen. The species name, *maculata*, means "spotted." It's a mystery how the species name arose, because the plant has no spots. In fact, the whitish veins on the leaves look like stripes, so another common name for the plant is striped wintergreen.

Adding to the confusion, the plant also sometimes is called spotted or striped pipsissewa because it looks similar to its relative, pipsissewa (*Chimaphila umbellata*). Pipsissewa has solid green leaves that are more rounded than those of spotted wintergreen. The two grow in similar habitats, but pipsissewa is far less common.

Native Americans used spotted wintergreen for a variety of medicinal purposes. In the early 1900s, spotted wintergreen was a natural flavoring in root beer and other beverages but has since been replaced by synthetic flavorings.

As you travel the trails this winter, look for our native wintergreens. And, perhaps enjoy a beverage or candy that got its start from one of these little plants.

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