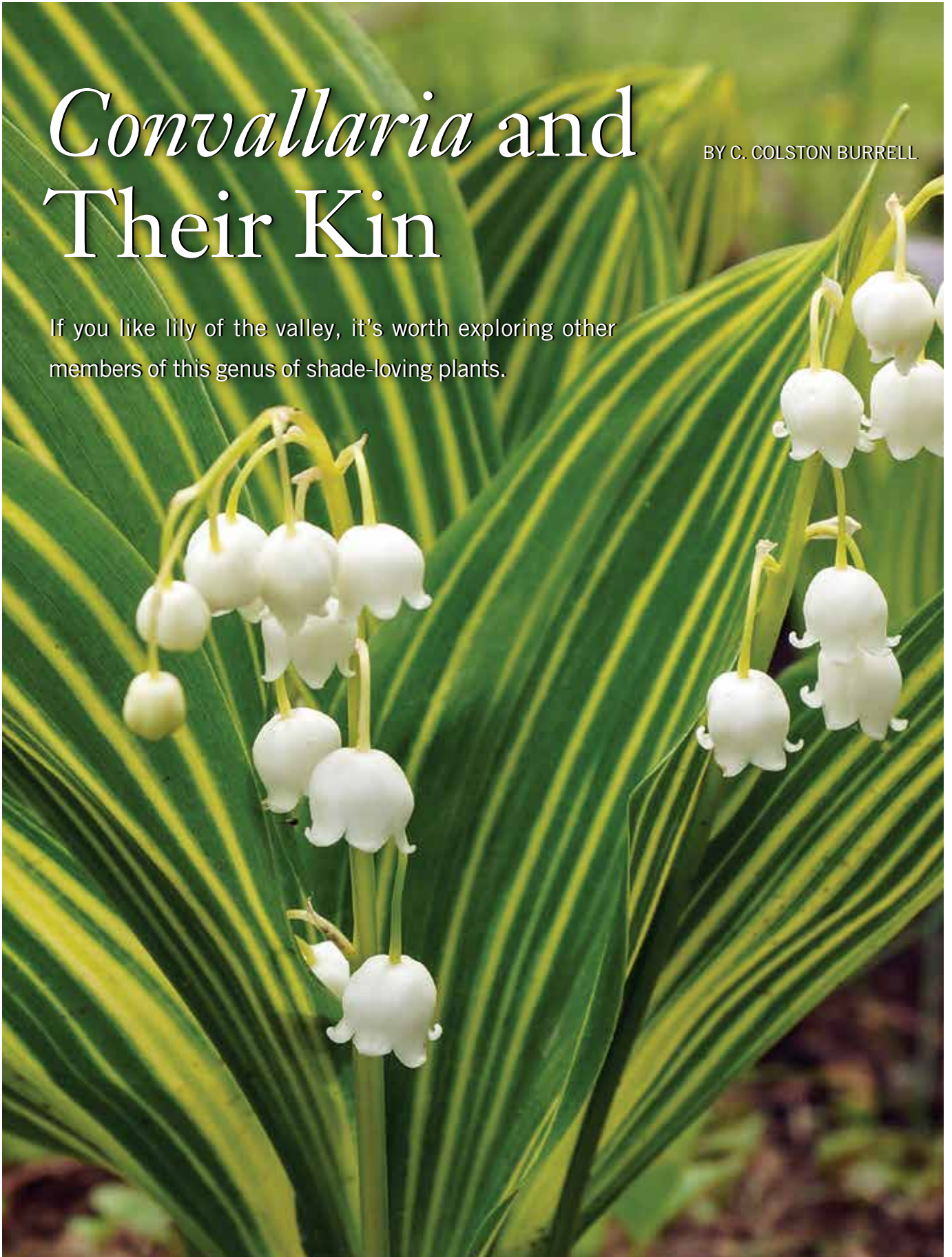


# *Convallaria* and Their Kin

BY C. COLSTON BURRELL

If you like lily of the valley, it's worth exploring other members of this genus of shade-loving plants.





**B**OTH ADORED and spurned by gardeners, lily of the valley (*Convallaria majalis*) is an enchanting and carefree heirloom perennial that spreads freely, if not recklessly. Multiple common names describe its iconic religious and secular status including May lily, May bells, lily of constancy, Jacob's ladder, and ladder-to-heaven. Legend also christened it Our Lady's tears as, supposedly, Mary's tears shed at the cross transformed into the delicate flowers.

English lore suggests that lilies of the valley sprang up from the blood of St. Leonard, who fought a great dragon. Their fragrant, nodding bells are celebrated in secular song and rhyme, including this ditty penned by Paul Lawrence Dunbar:

*"Sweetest of the flowers a-blooming, in the fragrant vernal days, is the lily of the valley with its soft, retiring ways"*

Lily of the valley also has a rich medicinal history. The leaves and flowers contain cardiac glycosides including convallatoxin, with a long and proven record as a cardiac tonic and a digitalis alternative. It purportedly is good for sprains, to strengthen memory, restore speech, prevent gout, and to ease colic. Despite these varied uses, all parts of the plant can be fatally toxic, so it should *never* be used except under the direction of a physician.

#### TAXONOMIC NOTES

Lily of the valley is among the most easily recognized and cherished members of a family set adrift by the winds of revisionist taxonomy. Historically, it found a home in the lily family (Liliaceae). Recently, this vast family was tamed based on DNA sequencing. Lily of the valley and other garden-worthy relations—including Solomon's seals (*Polygonatum*) and mayflowers (*Maianthemum*)—have,

for now at least, alighted in the asparagus family (Asparagaceae).

The generic name *Convallaria* derives from the Latin *convallis*—a valley, and the specific epithet *majalis* denotes May, the time wild plants flower in Europe. The common name lily of the valley is a direct translation of the archaic botanical name *Lilium convallium*.

Beginning in mid-spring, one-sided racemes 6 to 12 inches high bearing eight to 15 campanulate white flowers with six reflexed lobes emerge at ground level along with the foliage. The flowers offer intoxicating fragrance in the garden and vase. Pollinated by beetles and flies, flowers give way to red-orange berries in late summer. Each berry contains up to 24 seeds. Fruit set is generally low, as two different clones may be required for fertilization. Fleshy white rhizomes form eyes, or pips at regular intervals, allowing for rapid growth. Plants are clonal and often produce broad,

**Opposite page:** *Convallaria majalis* 'Striata'—also sold as 'Aureovariegata' and 'Variegata'—features variably striped foliage. **This page:** *Convallaria majalis*, shown here with Spanish bluebell (*Hyacinthoides hispanica*), spreads quickly to make a verdant groundcover.

## SELECTED CULTIVARS OF *CONVALLARIA MAJALIS*

**'Aureovariegata'** ('Striata' or 'Variegata') has leaves irregularly striped with pale yellow that may fade to green in summer.

**'Berlin Giant'** is reported to be a large plant with excellent stems for cutting.

**'Bordeaux'** is a tall selection with 10-inch stems and large flowers favored for cutting.

**'Cream da Mint'**, with large, sea-green leaves edged in citron-yellow, "came as a sport from some stock plants that I left unattended," says Rick Sawyer of Fernwood Nursery and Gardens. "Then, within two years, **'Fernwood Golden Slippers'**—with bright yellow foliage—appeared as a sport of 'Cream da Mint' and is true to form." Its leaves fade to chartreuse as the season progresses.

**'Flore Pleno'** ('Plena') is exceptional, with fully double, cream-colored flowers.

**'Fortin's Giant'** has large flowers on scapes 12 to 15 inches tall and is favored for cutting.

**'Hardwick Hall'** is a standout. Richard Fraser of Fraser's Thimble Farm notes the "lovely blue-green leaves with a creamy-white trim around the edge and the sweetly fragrant racemes make nice cut flowers. It is a well-behaved spreader with a stable leaf variegation."

**'Potsdam Stripe'** is similar to 'Aureovariegata' but has regular, bold stripes and seldom reverts.

**'Prolificans'** produces flowers that are densely clustered, making them appear double.

**'Rosea'** (*C. majalis* var. *rosea*) has pale metallic-pink flowers and an open habit.

Additional named selections include 'Albomarginata', 'Albostriata', 'Dorien', 'Haldon Grange', 'Hofheim', 'Silberconfolis', 'Touch of Lemon', and 'Vic Pawlowski's Gold'.

—C.C.B.



'Flore Pleno'



'Hardwick Hall'



'Rosea'

dense colonies. Their aggressive habit has obliged some states, including Virginia, Wisconsin and Alaska, to add this plant to their invasive species lists. Many of the named cultivars spread less vigorously.

Currently, botanists recognize three species of *Convallaria*, one native to North America, and the others to Eurasia. There are several varieties within those species and botanists still debate how to classify them.

*Convallaria majalis* (USDA Zones 2–8) is by far the most familiar and commonly grown species, with records of its cultiva-

tion dating to the 1400s. Variable in size and stature, this species is found in woods, scrub and meadows throughout Europe and into Northeast Asia, Greece and the Caucasus and is widely planted in North America. Mature foliage stands 8 to 10 inches high and each blade is 4 to 10 inches long. Flowering scapes may reach 10 inches, but most are shorter. In 1993, the Royal Horticultural Society bestowed an Award of Garden Merit to this species for its outstanding garden performance. [Descriptions of a number of the available selections of this species can be seen in the box above.]

Japanese lily of the valley (*C. keiskei*, Zones 5–9) is native to China, Japan, Korea, and Mongolia, where it grows in forests, shaded slopes and woodland edges. Similar in appearance to the European species, the leaves are narrower and of thin texture. The plants I have grown seem smaller and less vigorous, though some references refer to its larger stature. They reach 8 to 10 inches tall, with blades only 8 inches long. You may find cultivars from specialty nurseries and collectors including 'Snow Chimes' with a white edge on its green leaves and 'Soft Stripes'



## PROPAGATING LILY OF THE VALLEY

- Sow clean seed outdoors or in an unheated cold frame as soon as it is ripe.
- Germination, particularly of stored seed is slow, taking two to 12 months. Sow thinly so that the seedlings have room to grow undisturbed in the pot for their first year.
- Apply liquid feed during the growing season to ensure that the seedlings are well fed.
- Divide the young plants into individual pots when they die down in late summer. Grow them on in pots in a shady location in a cold frame for at least another year before planting them into their permanent positions.
- Lily of the valley is easily divided in early autumn when the vegetative shoots go dormant. Dig up the clumps and tease or break apart the thick rhizomes. Replant immediately in amended soil or bulk them up in a propagation bed until they are well rooted before replanting.

—C.C.B.

Lily of the valley pairs especially well in a woodland garden with many shade-loving ferns, such as Japanese beech fern (*Phegopteris decursive-pinnata*).

(or “Splashed Variegated”) which sports diffuse creamy striations throughout the foliage, giving it a frosted look.

American lily of the valley (*C. pseudomajalis*, also known as *C. majuscula*, Zones 5–8) is endemic to the Appalachian Mountains of the eastern United States. This is an overall larger and more erect species, with deep to sea green foliage 8 to 20 inches tall and upright inflorescences to 12 inches. Plants form open colonies of evenly spaced scapes on acid montane slopes near the tops of well-drained ridges and in sandy woods from Virginia

and West Virginia, south to Kentucky and Georgia. Plants generally grow in summer-dry soils under oaks. Eminently garden-worthy, this species is found in few plant catalogs and no selections have been named.

### IN THE GARDEN

All *Convallaria* species favor abundant spring sunshine and protection from burning rays in summer. Plants tolerate deep shade and root competition but may flower sparsely in those conditions. Lily of the valley thrives in average to hu-

mus-rich, neutral to moderately acidic soils that stay consistently moist. Established plants tolerate moderate drought but go dormant if dryness is chronic. Hardiness of most Asian species is largely untested, so experiment at both ends of the spectrum. In warmer zones, consistent moisture is key to success. Happily, plants are rabbit and deer resistant.

Lily of the valley is excellent for massing under shrubs and flowering trees. In his southern Indiana garden, former nurseryman Gene Bush uses lily of the valley in a challenging site under a mature sugar maple, with shade one side, sun the other, root competition and nutrient-poor soil. “Nothing we tried truly looked ‘right’ until we began using lily of the valley,” he says. “They rapidly filled in the allotted space between roots forming a circle around the base of the tree.” In Fernwood Nursery’s display garden at their facilities in Maine, Rick Sawyer combines the chartreuse foliage of lily of the valley cultivar ‘Fernwood’s Golden Slippers’ with

hobblebush (*Viburnum lantanoides*) for a much admired combination that offers white flowers in spring, red fruit, and then maroon foliage in the fall.

Richard Fraser of Fraser's Thimble Farms in British Columbia favors the selection 'Rosea' as a groundcover for the front of a border. "Its dense carpets are attractive punctuated with vases of tall ferns such as autumn fern (*Dryopteris erythrosora*), tassel fern (*Polystichum polyblepharum*), narrow glade fern (*Homalosorus pycnocarpus*), and ostrich fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*)." Other companionable perennials include hellebores, foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*), bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*), barrenworts (*Epimedium* spp.) as well as bugbanes (*Actaea* spp.) and other tall woodlanders. On a shaded terrace or along a path interweave them with foliage plants such as hostas, lungwort (*Pulmonaria* spp.), and coralbells (*Heuchera* spp.). Sawyer admires an eye-catching tapestry at Coastal

## Sources

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**Fernwood Nursery & Gardens**, Montville ME. [www.fernwoodnursery.com](http://www.fernwoodnursery.com).

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**Odyssey Bulbs**, South Lancaster, MA. <https://odysseybulbs.com>.

**Quackin' Grass Nursery**, Brooklyn, CT. [www.quackinggrassnursery.com](http://www.quackinggrassnursery.com).

## Resources

**Herbaceous Perennial Plants**, 4th ed. by Allan Armitage. Stipes Publishing, Champaign, IL, 2020.

**The Explorer's Garden: Rare and Unusual Perennials** by Daniel J. Hinkley. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2009

Maine Botanical Gardens that intermingles 'Fernwood Golden Slippers' and 'Cream da Mint', whose complementary foliage colors combine well with yellow-flowered *Corydalis lutea* and bold *Podophyllum hexandrum* with the red-and-silver fronds of *Athyrium* 'Godzilla'.

Wayne Paquette of Quackin' Grass Nursery in Connecticut waxes poetic about this diminutive charmer. "Spring's perfumed flowers speak of fresh, new life, while the sizable orange berries of autumn augment the opulence of this season. All this while providing the utility of a virtually weed-proof groundcover; it's magic." I concur. 🌿

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Sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*), *Convallaria majalis* 'Rosea', and lungwort (*Pulmonaria* sp.) combine for a multi-textured display.

## A FEW GARDEN-WORTHY RELATIVES

The taxonomic break-up of Convallariaceae assigned dissident garden favorites such as *Aspidistra*, *Polygonatum*, *Ophiopogon*, and *Rohdea* to new families. Here are a few kissing cousins that undeservedly remain in the shadow of their showy relations.



***Maianthemum stellatum*** (Zones 3–7), stary Solomon’s plume, forms an open groundcover 12 to 20 inches tall, with upright stems clothed in a dozen or more linear, gray-green leaves. Terminal clusters of creamy spring stars give way to maroon-striped berries. It is a denizen of open woods, savannas, and woodland edges across a broad range of northern North America. The selection ‘Blue Dune’ has glaucous blue-green foliage.

***Ophiopogon jaburan*** (Zones 7–10), giant monkey grass, is an Asian native that forms an upright, deep evergreen vase of strap-like leaves to 30 inches tall. Summer spikes of pale lavender flowers arch outward from the center of the clump. ‘Vittatus’ has luminous, gold-striped foliage.

***Reineckea carnea*** (Zones 7–10), with the unfortunate name of false mondo grass, is a matted groundcover with arched, strappy mid- to deep green leaves. Short, clustered, pinkish flowers give way to blue berries. A native of warmer climes in Japan and China, in my Zone 7 garden, the foliage often burns in winter, though they re-sprout from the rhizomes in spring.

***Speirantha gardenii*** (Zones 5–8), Chinese lily of the valley, produces interlocking triads of 6- to 10-inch arching glossy evergreen leaves from slow-creeping rhizomes. Spring flower clusters of this woodlander are small stary galaxies on naked stalks borne adjacent to the foliage clusters.

***Tupistra nutans*** (Zones 8–10) resembles a blousy *Rohdea* with arching, strappy foliage to 3 feet long. In late autumn, abundant spikes of 4-inch, pendulous, mustard-yellow flowers with purple centers appear. This Indian native is eminently garden-worthy, though less hardy than its cousins.

—C.C.B.