

# Virginia Creeper

Virginia creeper, *Parthenocissus quinquefolia*, has always intrigued me. The vine with heavily veined, dark-green, palmate-shaped leaves may grow prostrate across the ground or climb 30 feet straight up any surface. Consequently, Virginia creeper is frequently found spreading like a fan across the south or southwestern sides of large buildings, particularly those with brick walls.

While the dark-green foliage creates a lush growth on the sides of buildings, trees and utility poles all summer, it is not until late summer that Virginia creeper matures into the stunningly gorgeous beauty that it is destined to be. The foliage turns a brilliant red, announcing to more than 30 species of birds that its dark-blue berries are ripe for their feasting. As fall progresses, the leaves fade to a lovely soft rosy pink.

Beginning in early July, the plant produces its tiny flowers. Each flower bears five petals with five spreading stamens. The berries mature by fall. The blue-black fruits get a whitish powdery substance on their surface.

Mockingbirds, robins, thrushes, bluebirds, woodpeckers and brown thrashers are among some of the birds that feed on the berries.

Adding Virginia creeper into our landscape can create an opportunity to attract the magnificent sphinx moths to our backyards, as well as providing food and some cover for a host of birds. Inviting Virginia creeper into our suburban or urban yards, however, is not an invitation to be made without pre-establishing a strategic location and a set of behavior control tactics. Virginia creeper tends towards aggressive and opportunistic behavior.

First, Virginia creeper has a unique way of climbing. Not only does it produce curling tendrils which wind around structures, much as greenbrier and grape do, it also generates tiny adhesive discs at the tips of each tendril that come in contact with a surface it can stick to. Several sources have quoted that Darwin once did an experiment with the plant and discovered that if just five discs were to grow on one tendril, their combined strength could



Steve Shaluta

*The berries often cling to the vine until late winter, providing food to many species of birds.*

*The scientific species name for Virginia Creeper – *quinquefolia* – is very descriptive of its leaves and a great aid in identifying the plant. If you know Latin (or are familiar with the word quintuplets), you would recognize that the first half of the name – *quinque* – means “five” and the last half means “leaf.” Though often confused with poison ivy, the five leaflets quickly distinguish this nonpoisonous plant from the poisonous three-leaflet look-alike.*



Steve Shaluta



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*Virginia creeper can spread quickly if not controlled.*

support 10 pounds. Once attached, these discs are extremely difficult to pull free from a surface. Removing the plant from a surface can peel paint, dislodge vinyl siding, and bring down gutters.



Art Shromo

*Tiny adhesive discs at the end of tendrils enable Virginia creeper to climb buildings and other structures.*

The plant will grow as high as any surface it can cling to, and with its curling tendrils will expand onto nearby surfaces. Consequently, you should provide a trellis, or start a plant against an outbuilding away from your house or garage. But what an incredibly beautiful addition it can make to your landscape if you can carefully nudge and direct its growth over an arbor or trellis to create a border. If you have a large tree, you can establish a plant at the base of the tree. Virginia creeper does best in full sunlight for at least part of the day.

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