

Niagara College Greenhouse & Nursery Success Sheet No. 36

Sweet Woodruff

Sweet woodruff has been gaining popularity lately; gardeners in search of a unique shade plant have found what they are looking for in this unpretentious perennial. It is easy to grow, and it can be found at the local nursery in either the perennial or herb sections.

Background

A woodland herb native to Europe, sweet woodruff, or *Galium odoratum*, was first noted in texts in the thirteenth century. It was called “wuderove” and, later, “wood-rove”; the “rove” was taken from the French word *rovelle*, meaning “wheel”. Perhaps this is because sweet woodruff’s leaves appear in whorls around the stem and the leaflets resemble the spokes on a wheel. In old French works, *Galium odoratum* is called muge-de-boys or musk-of-the-woods.

When dried, the leaves smell strongly of freshly mown hay and vanilla; however, they have only a slight scent when freshly picked. The leaves were used in potpourri; sweet woodruff has a naturally occurring chemical in its leaves that acts as a fixative, binding all the aromatic scents in the potpourri to the leaves of the woodruff. Sweet woodruff is also the key ingredient in German May-wine.

Description

Sweet woodruff forms a thick groundcover that is 8" tall; a single plant will spread up to 10" wide. Bright-green, star-like whorls of leaves consisting of six to eight leaflets cover erect, green stems; tiny clusters of white, four-petal flowers grace the fine-textured plant in late spring.

Culture

Sweet woodruff is hardy in zones 4 to 9. The plant likes a moist, slightly acidic soil (pH of 5.0) rich in organic matter. The soil must also be well drained. Sweet woodruff does well in partial shade to full shade. In a northern exposure, partial shade is suitable; in a southern exposure, full shade is best. This groundcover will spread vigorously under favorable conditions, and it rarely gets pests or diseases.

Landscape Value

Galium odoratum is happiest in a woodland setting and is an excellent plant for shady areas of the garden; it is also pleasing to see something other than pachysandra or periwinkle creeping across the earth beneath the trees.

Sweet woodruff can be grown with hydrangeas and rhododendrons or along a woodland path. Leave the plant to spread on its own amidst a grove of deciduous trees, or plant sweet woodruff with daffodils, tulips and scilla. When the spring bulbs are finished their colorful display, *Galium odoratum* will be ready to cover their unsightly foliage as the bulbs die back to the ground. Sweet woodruff will keep the area green and lush from spring to the first frosts.

Wherever it is planted, sweet woodruff makes an excellent addition to the garden, and its subtle charm will not be overlooked by fellow gardeners who pay a visit.

Tamara Moore, Class of 2003

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Niagara-on-the-Lake Campus, 135 Taylor Road, Niagara-on-the-Lake, ON L0S 1J0
phone: (905) 641-2252, ext. 4082; fax: (905) 988-4307 e-mail: mnewell@niagaracollege.ca
Website: <http://greenhousenursery.niagaracollege.ca>