Catharanthus roseus
Edward F. Gilman, Teresa Howe

Introduction

Also known as Vinca rosea, Vinca multiflora, Vinca grows 7 to 24 inches high and wide, forming a mound of colorful flowers in white, pink, or rosy-purple on brittle stems (Fig. 1). Cultivars are available with carpet-like or upright habits. Flowering is prolific throughout the warm months, although plants may establish poorly in very hot weather. The plant tolerates heat, and flowers in the hottest weather, probably better than most other flowering ground covers. Spaced 12 to 20 inches apart, plants will form a solid mass of mounded foliage and flowers 6 to 8-weeks after sowing seed, provided they are fertilized, watered lightly (or not at all), and planted in full sun.

General Information

Scientific name: Catharanthus roseus
Pronunciation: kath-uh-RANTH-us ROE-zee-us
Common name(s): Periwinkle, Vinca, Madagascar Periwinkle
Family: Apocynaceae
Plant type: annual; perennial; herbaceous; ground cover
USDA hardiness zones: 9B through 11 (Fig. 2)
Planting month for zone 7: Jun
Planting month for zone 8: May; Jun
Planting month for zone 9: Apr; May; Jun; Sep; Oct
Planting month for zone 10 and 11: Feb; Mar; Apr; May; Sep; Oct; Nov; Dec
Origin: not native to North America
Uses: edging; ground cover; mass planting; naturalizing; hanging basket; cascading down a wall; border

Availability: generally available in many areas within its hardiness range

Description

Height: 1 to 2 feet
Spread: 1 to 2 feet
Plant habit: round
Plant density: moderate
Catharanthus roseus -- Periwinkle

Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

**Growth rate:** moderate  
**Texture:** medium

**Foliage**

- **Leaf arrangement:** opposite/subopposite  
- **Leaf type:** simple  
- **Leaf margin:** entire  
- **Leaf shape:** elliptic (oval)  
- **Leaf venation:** pinnate  
- **Leaf type and persistence:** deciduous  
- **Leaf blade length:** 2 to 4 inches  
- **Leaf color:** green  
- **Fall color:** not applicable  
- **Fall characteristic:** not applicable

**Flower**

- **Flower color:** pink; purple; lavender  
- **Flower characteristic:** year-round flowering

**Fruit**

- **Fruit shape:** pod or pod-like  
- **Fruit length:** .5 to 1 inch  
- **Fruit cover:** dry or hard  
- **Fruit color:** green  
- **Fruit characteristic:** inconspicuous and not showy

**Trunk and Branches**

- **Trunk/bark/branches:** not applicable  
- **Current year stem/twig color:** green  
- **Current year stem/twig thickness:** medium

**Culture**

- **Light requirement:** plant grows in part shade/part sun  
- **Soil tolerances:** clay; sand; acidic; slightly alkaline; loam  
- **Drought tolerance:** high  
- **Soil salt tolerances:** unknown  
- **Plant spacing:** 12 to 18 inches
Other

Roots: not applicable
Winter interest: plant has winter interest due to unusual form, nice persistent fruits, showy winter trunk, or winter flowers
Outstanding plant: not particularly outstanding
Invasive potential: may self-seed each year
Pest resistance: very sensitive to one or more pests or diseases which can affect plant health or aesthetics

Use and Management

Periwinkle will cascade over a wall or container and makes a nice hanging basket. Derivatives from Periwinkle are used in a variety of medicines and treatments for human ailments including leukemia and hodgkins disease. Plants seed themselves into the landscape.

The plant requires full sun and has a long growing period. Periwinkle likes to be kept on the dry side and the roots will rot if irrigated too frequently. It is best not to irrigate periwinkle more than two or three times after it is planted. Once summer rains begin, plants often succumb to root rot diseases from too much water. A bed of periwinkle looks great until this time, but it should usually be considered a short lived annual. A three month period of color without disease is considered very good. Once plants are removed, plant with another annual to finish the season. Some horticulturists have success growing periwinkle on a raised bed comprised of sand or other very well-drained soil.

Propagation is by seed or cuttings. Softwood cuttings can be taken and rooted during summer. The seed germinates in one week at a temperature of 70 to 75-degrees F. Keep the flat of seeds in the dark until the seed germinates and don’t over-water. Planting may be done at any time during the year in USDA hardiness zones 10 and 11.

There are a variety of cultivars available for flower color and plant size. The ‘Carpet’ and ‘Little’ Series grow to no more than 12 inches tall. They too are sensitive to root disease.

No pests are of major concern.

Pests and Diseases

Root rots regularly cause decay of roots and lower stems.

Fusarium wilt can cause plant death.

Blight causes brown or black spots which extend inward from the leaf edge and eventually cover the whole leaf. Space plants farther apart in subsequent plantings. Remove infected plants.

Canker and dieback cause the shoot tip to become dark brown, wilt, and die back to the soil surface. The disease is most common during rainy weather. Infected plants should be discarded.

Several fungi cause leaf spots on Periwinkle but they are usually harmless.