

Asarum caudatum

Common names: Wild Ginger, long-tailed ginger

Asarum caudatum is a member of the birthwort family (Aristolochiaceae) and is found in many of the moister parts of Washington, B. C., Oregon, Northern California, Montana and Idaho. It is usually seen in coniferous woods but grows well in shady, moist soils at most elevations. It will form a large mat – spreading quite well in its favored acidic soil – so makes an excellent ground cover in the right habitat. The 5-7 cm heart-shaped leaves remain green, and the flower, composed of 3 sepals, is usually dark maroon, shaped like an urn with three long tails (the calyx tips). The flowers remain hidden at ground level so you must lift the leaves to see them. It is found on Moscow Mountain.



Variations: There are many species of *Asarum* world-wide. But the primary one throughout the west is *Asarum caudatum*, and the primary one in the eastern U.S. is *Asarum canadense*. Oregon and Northern California also have *Asarum hartwegii* and *Asarum marmoratum*, both of which have white marbling in the leaves. Lewis and Clark collected several varieties, collecting this *Asarum* at Lolo Pass.

Use in the landscape: *Asarum caudatum* makes an excellent ground cover. It requires moderate watering in the summer. It will grow in full shade, or in partial shade tolerating low light sun or morning sun. They do well planted with rhododendrons, ferns, cedars, and other shade and moisture loving plants. It has a strong smell of ginger when crushed. It should be used more often as a ground cover instead of some of the more rampant ornamentals.

Availability: The eastern variety *Asarum canadense* is often available in catalogs. *Asarum caudatum* is available at various websites and should be available at native plant sales in the Northwest. Several Chinese asarums are also available in ornamental plant catalogs.

Pests: In the garden the plants and flowers are said to be bothered by slugs in Western Washington. One of the larger mats in my garden regularly has all the leaves eaten in the fall when all else is dry – either deer or moose, I suspect, as the leaves usually disappear overnight. Other mats remain untouched. The bare rhizomes unfold new bright green leaves early in the spring.

Edibility: Although some species are said to have edible roots (a ginger substitute) other books say not to eat them. Native Americans are reported to have medicinal uses for this *Asarum* – as a calming presence, dried leaves as a deodorant, poultices made of leaves because of anti-bacterial properties, and boiled rhizomes to be used as a medicinal tea as a remedy for stomach upset.

Propagation: I have not propagated any plants by seed. However the plants show up in various parts of the garden, and I have read that the fleshy seed capsules are carried by ants as are the seeds of many native plants. Rhizomes, which break off the plant, root freely so can be planted elsewhere starting a new mat.

Native Plants should not be dug from the wild. Please purchase from reputable dealers.

For more information: Arthur R. Kruckeberg, [Gardening with Native Plants of the Pacific Northwest](#); Numerous sites can be found on the web by typing the plant name in a search engine such as Google.