THREE BRIGHT BERRIES

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October is the month when thoughts about the countryside tend to turn away from flowers and start to dwell on fruits. One remembers Keats:

"Seasons of mists and mellow fruitfulness
Close bosom’d harvest of the maturing sun . . ."

All around in the woods and fields, flowers are aging and falling, their places taken by swelling and ripening fruits of all kinds, optimistic tokens that next year’s generation of plants is already being planned. It might be interesting to consider in some detail three small plants, not closely related to each other, but all found in the Virginia woods, and all more noticeable when they are bearing berries than when they are blooming.

True wintergreen, Gaultheria procumbens, is not in fact a member of the “wintergreen” family (Pyrolaceae) but belongs with the heaths in the Ericaceae, the family which includes the azaleas, rhododendrons, mountain laurel and blueberries. Gaultheria is one of the smallest representatives of the family. It is an evergreen perennial which only grows a few inches high. The specific name ‘procumbens’ means ‘lying flat’ and must refer to the creeping, underground stems; the little shoots which are sent above ground from the stems are upright. The genus Gaultheria was called after an eighteenth century naturalist Jean François Gaultier who was also court physician in Quebec. The wintergreen flower is shaped like an urn, a form characteristic of quite a few members of the heath family. The flowers are white and nodding, blooming in midsummer. After they have bloomed, ovary and calyx together enlarge to form a bright red fleshy berry, and it is this which will catch one’s eye on the floor of the woods in the fall. Wintergreen leaves are very aromatic with the well known “oil of wintergreen” flavor, and many people enjoy making tea from them. Alternative names for this little plant are teaberry, checkerberry, mountain tea, ivy leaves and in French Canada ‘petit thé du bois’ (little tea of the woods).

Another bright red berry which may be found close to the forest floor at this time of the year is the partridge-berry. This is not at all closely related to wintergreen but belongs to the Rubiaceae, a strange family whose other common representative around here is the bluet. The stems of partridge-berry, or Mitchella repens, are prostrate and above ground, with pairs of small, round, opposite leaves.
at intervals along the stems. In the axils of the leaves are little white, trumpet-shaped flowers which are always in pairs and have a pleasant, fragrant smell. After the flower has bloomed, the two ovaries fuse to form a single red berry at the top of which can be seen the remains of each calyx. *Mitchella* also commemorates an eighteenth century botanist, this time one who lived in our state. Dr. John Mitchell was probably born in England but came to Virginia in the 1720's. He lived at Urbanna where he was the official physician to the poor of Middlesex county. He was very much interested in botany and zoology, studying in particular the habits of the opossum and the natural history of the local trees. He wrote a long treatise on Virginia pines. He corresponded frequently with Linnaeus, who later named the partridge-berry after Mitchell in recognition of the latter's services to botany.

*Actaea pachypoda* is known variously as white baneberry, white cohosh, necklace weed and doll's eyes. The last name refers aptly to the berries which are pure white, tipped with black or deep purple dot, and borne on a brilliant red stalk. *Actaea*, which belongs to the large buttercup family, the Ranunculaceae, occurs in rich woods and thickets throughout the state. Each stem bears a cluster of small, somewhat uninteresting white flowers which bloom in May and June. Then from July to October come the bright berries. Both stalks and fruit are green at first, but as they ripen they assume their brilliant contrasting colors which are an unmistakable sight in the woods. The name necklace weed must not be taken too literally for the berries are, in fact, poisonous.

So there is really no need to feel depressed that the summer is on its way out. There is still plenty of interest in the woods. Those who want a change from the fall colors of the leaves can try looking down at their feet to see what plants are producing attractive fruits at that level!