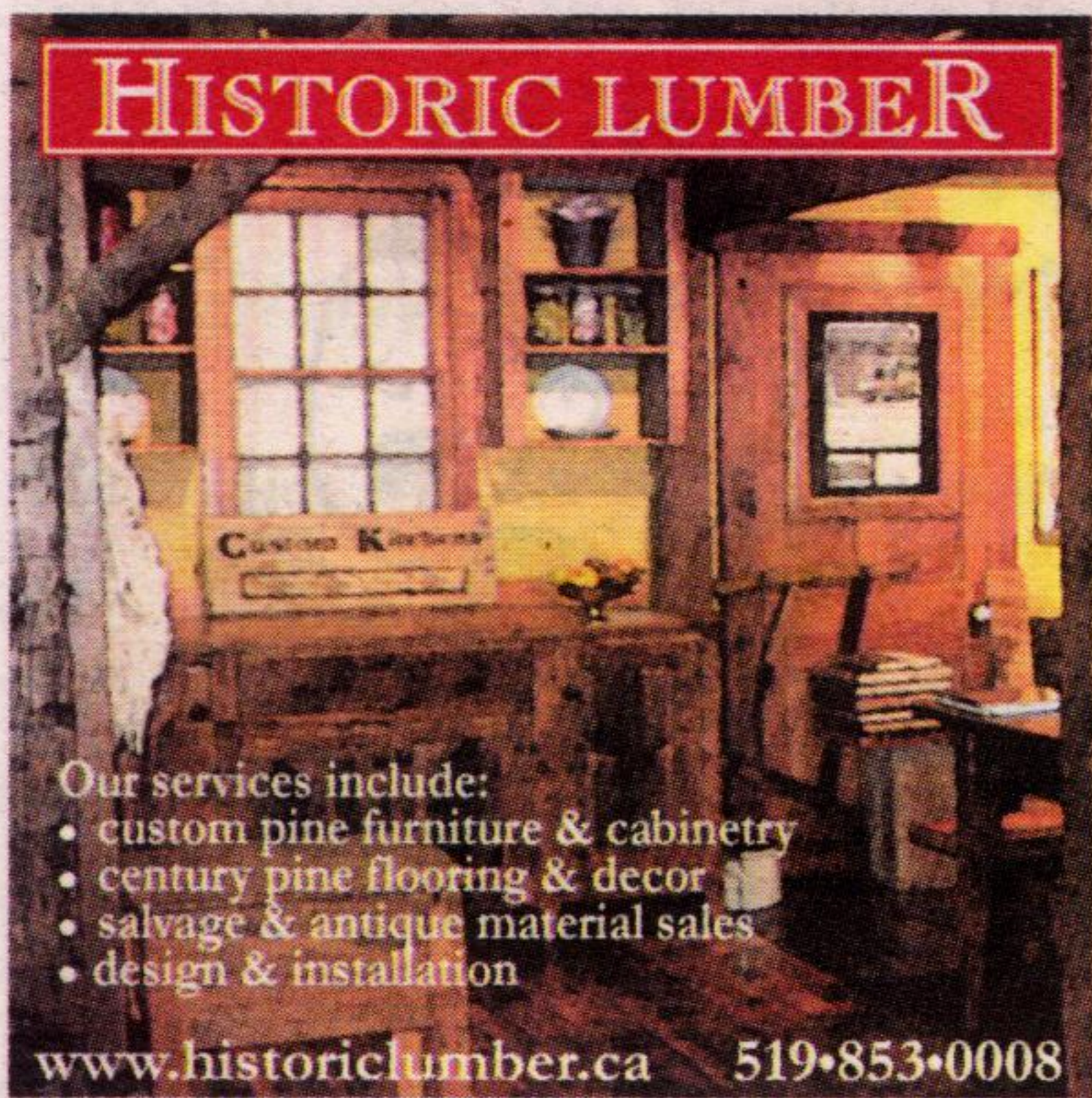


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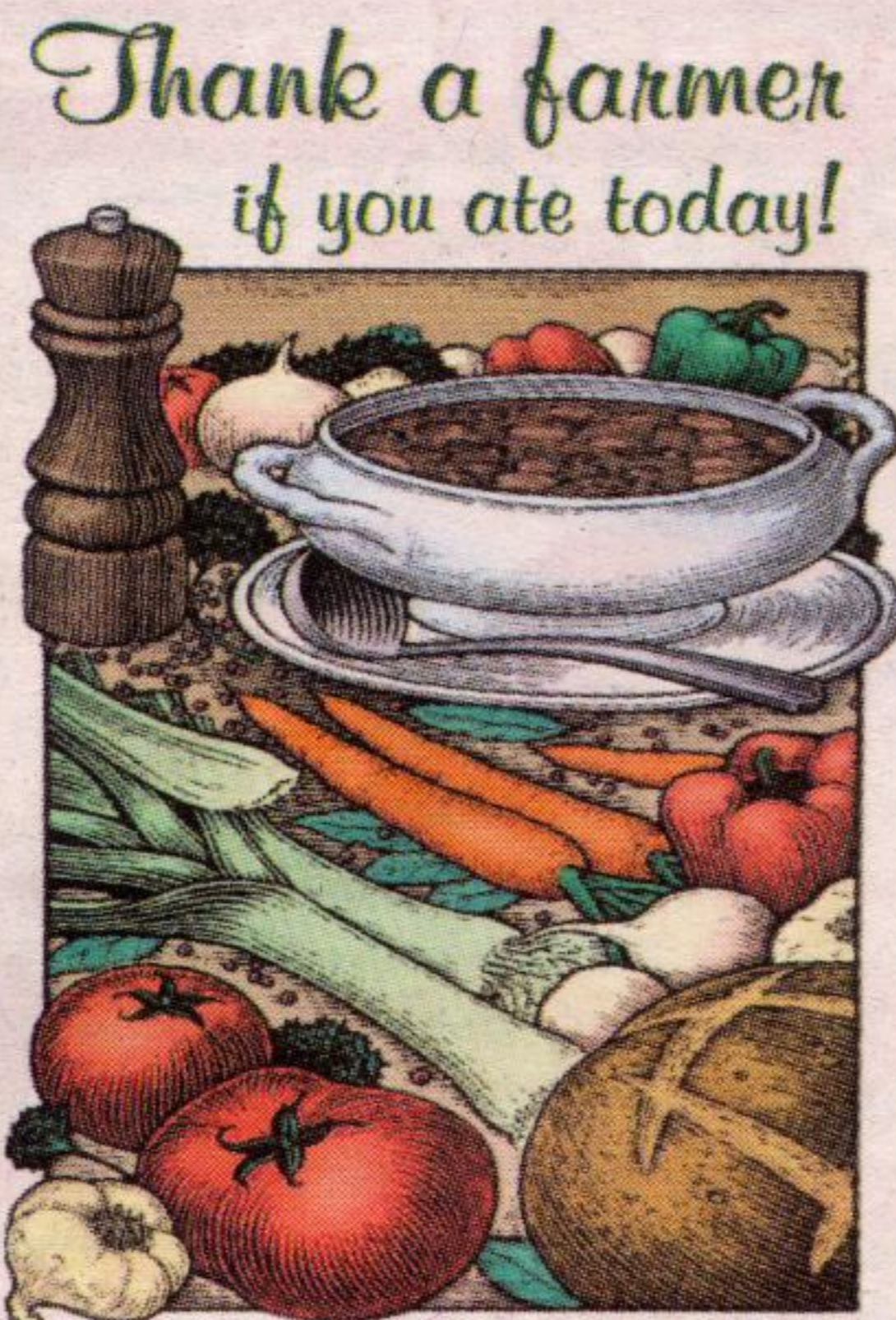


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Giving You the Dirt

By SEAN JAMES, N.P.D.,
PRESIDENT OF FERN RIDGE LANDSCAPING

Lowering your maintenance

I am a pack rat. A friend said, "No! You're an amateur historian!" That certainly sounds better. Unfortunately, I'm a pack rat with plants too, collecting one of everything and trying to make it work visually. Sadly, the following are not words which I live by. Large stretches of groundcovers require less maintenance in the long run, less pesticide and help your yard look visually interesting.

The first thing we need to know is that some plants don't play well with others. Each of the groundcovers listed below will have a number between 1 and 10. This represents its 'Napoleonic Scale' - its tendency to try and take over the world or invade its neighbours. The least invasive, will be '1' and the most invasive '10'. Invasive, doesn't mean 'bad'. It means, "be careful where you put it". You don't want to put Lamiastrum (common name - Yellow Archangel) near a natural area where it could invade or in a perennial border where it will swamp its neighbours.

Lamiastrum is a great groundcover for deep shade since its silver banded leaves brighten dark corners. It is perfect as a grass substitute under trees. Its cousin, Lamium or Dead Nettle (horrible common name!) is fairly well behaved being a '5' on the Napoleonic Scale. It also has silver variegated leaves and has nice pink spring flowers as well. It would prefer some shade. It can be a bit overwhelming for delicate neighbours.

Another of my favorites is Bigroot Geranium (6 N.S.), Geranium macrorrhizum, which is stellar for deepest shade or partial sun. Pink flowers in spring and often-nice fall colour make it a plant worth having. It will spread slowly underground but can toss seeds around which germinate easily.

For full sun, any of the creeping Sedum or Stonecrops is lovely. Ruby Carpet (3) is one of my favorites with burgundy leaves and red flowers. It prefers full sun and spreads slowly over the ground. Beware of Goldmoss Stonecrop that spreads by seed and by dropping leaves, which root and

become new plants. If you get it in your garden you'll never get rid of it. It's less of a Napoleon and more of an America. (Did I cross the line there?)

Two other great plants for full sun are Blue Rug Juniper (2) and Japanese Garden Juniper (2). Both spread slowly and are low growers. I love the one inch tall, light blue of Blue Rug and the Oriental feel of the Garden Juniper.

Bedstraw or Sweet Woodruff, (5), (Gallium oderatum), it spreads by underground rhizome and by rooting on top of the soil. White flowers in spring, tolerance of sun or shade, no pests or disease and lovely fragrance when dried - of fresh mown hay - make it worth having. It can overwhelm some less vigorous plants so be cautious where you put it. You don't want it near a Garden Juniper, speaking from experience.

A couple of old stalwarts that spread slowly but form clumps thick enough to block weeds are Hosta (1) and Daylily (1). (An interesting aside - those of you who claim not to know botanical names know more than you think. Hosta, Iris, Geranium, and Impatiens are all botanical names. The proper common name for Hosta is Plantain Lily but no one uses it - go figure.) If planted two feet apart, and given a couple of years, both of these plants will form thick barriers which weeds will find it difficult to penetrate. They even make good neighbours to each other since they have contrasting texture.

Many plants sold as groundcovers are just weeds with a good press agent. Goutweed, Lily-of-the-Valley and Ribbon Grass are all 10's on the scale and cannot be destroyed once you have them in your garden. BEWARE. They may be lovely plants but you'll have them forever if you plant them and they spread like demons.

Plant groundcovers in large drifts to fill the space well. You'll weed a lot for the first year and a bit on the second year but after that weeding should be minimal. Mulching with compost or cocoa mulch is also recommended to keep moisture in and cut weed germination.

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