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G A R D E N I N G  S E R I E S

YARD

Ground Cover Plants

no. 7.400

by J.E. Klett and R.A. Cox¹

Quick Facts...

Ground covers help link together ornamental plants.

Plants that are low-growing (generally less than 12 inches) and spread easily are suitable ground cover plants.

Ideally, a ground cover should be dense enough to inhibit weeds.

Build walkways through areas intended for foot traffic before planting a ground cover.

Incorporate compost or another good quality organic material into soils before planting.

Use ground covers to prevent soil erosion, as a design element, or where grass is not practical.

A ground cover should spread by itself. Species that produce rhizomes or stolons or that spread by offsets or tip layering are best suited for ground covers. They will develop rapidly into a dense cover. Some, however, grow so fast they can become invasive.

A ground cover should be sufficiently dense to inhibit competition from weeds. If the ground cover will be used to prevent soil erosion on a steep slope, it should have a vigorous growth habit.

Considerations

Control existing weeds before planting ground covers, or weeds may reduce the attractiveness of the ground cover planting. No one species of ground cover plant works for every landscape problem. Consider the following factors before selecting a ground cover for a specific situation:

- To maintain design balance, select lower-growing ground covers for smaller areas and taller ones for larger areas or steep slopes.
- The amount of sun versus shade and the exposure to winter sun and winds are important considerations in selecting a ground cover.
- Most ground covers will not tolerate excessive foot traffic. If foot traffic is anticipated, install a walkway through the area before planting the ground cover.
- Improve soils with good quality organic matter before planting. Incorporate 2 to 4 cubic yards of compost or other organic materials into each 1,000 square feet.

Maintenance

All ground cover plantings require maintenance, some more than others. This contradicts the common perception that ground covers are "no-maintenance plants." Lawns also are considered ground covers, but may require more moisture, sunlight, fertilizer and maintenance than other ground cover choices.

Evergreen ground covers, such as creeping juniper, require little care. Ground covers that develop flowers and fruit often require more maintenance to keep them attractive. Weeds may become a significant maintenance problem in a ground cover planting.

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Table 1: Selected ground covers for hot, dry, sunny exposures.

Plant Name	Type	Flower Color	Bloom Time	Remarks
Small areas — under 50 sq. ft.				
<i>Achillea tomentosa</i> Woolly yarrow	Herbaceous	Yellow	June-Aug.	Poor soil; woolly foliage; spreading.
<i>Antennaria</i> spp. Pussytoes	Herbaceous	White to pink	May-June	Native; silver gray, mat-like foliage; unique flowers.
<i>Arabis</i> spp. Rockcress	Herbaceous, evergreen	White to pink	April-May	Soft, gray, spreading foliage.
<i>Artemisia schmidtiana</i> 'Silver Mound' Silver mound sage	Herbaceous	Unimportant	—	Mounded, feathery, aromatic, silver-gray foliage.
<i>Aurinia saxatilis</i> Basket-of-gold	Herbaceous	Yellow	April-May	Shear after bloom.
<i>Penstemon pinifolius</i> Pineleaf penstemon	Herbaceous, evergreen	Reddish-orange	June-Sept.	Needle-like, evergreen foliage.
<i>Saponaria ocymoides</i> Rock soapwort	Herbaceous	Pink	May-July	Shear after bloom.
<i>Sedum acre</i> Goldmoss sedum	Herbaceous, evergreen	Yellow	May-June	Low growing; succulent, dark green leaves.
<i>Sedum kamtschaticum</i> Kamtschatka sedum	Herbaceous, evergreen	Orange-yellow	July-Aug.	Scalloped, succulent, green leaves.
<i>Sedum spurium</i> 'Dragon's Blood' sedum	Herbaceous, evergreen	Red	July-Aug.	Succulent leaves tinged bronze-red.
<i>Sempervivum</i> spp. Houseleek, hen and chicks	Herbaceous, evergreen	Unimportant	—	Succulent, evergreen leaves in rosettes.
<i>Stachys byzantina</i> Lamb's ear	Herbaceous	Purple	June-July	Furry, gray leaves resemble a lamb's ear.
Large areas — greater than 50 sq. ft.				
<i>Callirhoe involucrata</i> Poppy mallow	Herbaceous	Red-purple	June-Aug.	Trailing stems with saucer-like flowers.
<i>Cerastium tomentosum</i> Snow-in-summer	Herbaceous	White	May-June	Aggressive; shear after bloom.
<i>Delosperma cooperi</i> Purple ice plant	Herbaceous, evergreen	Purple	June-frost	Succulent foliage turns reddish in winter.
<i>Delosperma nubigenum</i> Yellow ice plant	Herbaceous, evergreen	Yellow	May-June	Succulent foliage turns reddish in winter.
<i>Juniperus horizontalis</i> Creeping juniper	Woody, evergreen	—	—	Several low-growing varieties including 'Bar Harbor,' 'Blue Chip,' 'Prince of Wales' and 'Wiltonii.'
<i>Juniperus sabina</i> Savin juniper	Woody, evergreen	—	—	Several low-growing varieties including 'Buffalo,' 'Broadmoor' and 'Calgary Carpet.'
<i>Polygonum aubertii</i> Silver lace vine	Woody	White	July-Sept.	Aggressive vine usable as ground cover.
<i>Polygonum cuspidatum</i> 'Compactum' Japanese fleece flower	Woody	Pink	Aug.-Sept.	Aggressive; thick, green leaves with red veins; red fall color.

Table 2: Selected ground covers for sun to part shade.

Plant Name	Type	Flower Color	Bloom Time	Remarks
Small areas — under 50 sq. ft.				
<i>Alyssum montanum</i> Mountain alyssum	Herbaceous	Yellow	April-May	Gray foliage.
<i>Arenaria verna</i> Moss sandwort	Herbaceous	White	May	Mat-forming; prefers light shade.
<i>Armeria maritima</i> Thrift	Herbaceous, evergreen	Pink, white, purple	May-June	Grass-like foliage; several varieties.
<i>Aubrieta</i> spp. False rockcress	Herbaceous	Purple, blue, red	May-June	Several varieties; mat-like foliage.
<i>Ceratostigma plumbaginoides</i> Plumbago	Herbaceous	Dark blue	Aug-Sept.	Attractive green foliage turns red in fall.
<i>Dianthus deltooides</i> 'Brilliant,' 'Zing Rose'	Herbaceous	Red	May-June	Dark green foliage; mat-like.

Table 2, continued: Selected ground covers for sun to part shade.

Plant Name	Type	Flower Color	Bloom Time	Remarks
<i>Dianthus plumarius</i> Cottage pink	Herbaceous	Pink, white	June-July	Fragrant flowers; several varieties.
<i>Festuca ovina glauca</i> Blue fescue	Herbaceous	Unimportant	—	Silvery-blue clump grass.
<i>Gypsophila repens</i> Creeping baby's breath	Herbaceous	White-pink	June-July	Mat-like.
<i>Heuchera sanguinea</i> Coral bells	Herbaceous	Red, pink, white	June-Aug.	Mounded foliage with taller bell-shaped flowers.
<i>Iberis sempervirens</i> Candytuft	Herbaceous, evergreen	White	May-June	Dark green, mounded foliage.
<i>Penstemon caespitosus</i> Creeping or mat penstemon	Herbaceous	Blue	May-June	Very low-growing; dense mat.
<i>Phlox subulata</i> Moss pink or creeping phlox	Herbaceous, evergreen	Pink, white, lavender	April-May	Several varieties; needle-like foliage.
<i>Polygonum affine</i> Himalayan border jewel	Herbaceous	Pink	Aug.-Sept.	Mat-like foliage becomes copper in fall.
<i>Potentilla nepalensis</i> 'Willmottiae'	Herbaceous	Rose-red	June-July	Strawberry-like leaves.
<i>Thymus x citriodorus</i> Lemon thyme	Herbaceous, evergreen	Purple	June-July	Lemon-scented foliage.
<i>Thymus pseudoanuginosus</i> Woolly thyme	Herbaceous	Pink, purple	June-July	Mat-like, woolly-gray foliage; turns purplish in winter; sparse flowers.
<i>Thymus serpyllum</i> Mother-of-thyme	Herbaceous, evergreen	Purple	June-July	Aromatic foliage; mat-like.
<i>Veronica incana</i> Silver speedwell	Herbaceous	Blue	May-July	Silvery foliage.
<i>Veronica liwanensis</i> Turkish veronica	Herbaceous	Blue	May-June	Low growing; dark green leaves.
<i>Veronica pectinata</i> Woolly veronica	Herbaceous	Lavender	May-June	Low growing; gray foliage; evergreen some winters.
<i>Veronica prostrata</i> Prostrate speedwell	Herbaceous	Blue to purple	May-June	Dense mats.
<i>Veronica repens</i> Creeping speedwell	Herbaceous	Blue to purple	May-June	Dense mats.
<i>Waldsteinia fragarioides</i> Barren strawberry	Herbaceous, evergreen	Yellow	April-May	Sparse fruit is inedible.
<i>Waldsteinia ternata</i> Siberian barren strawberry	Herbaceous	Yellow	April-May	More compact growth habit; fruit inedible.
Large areas — greater than 50 sq. ft.				
<i>Campsis radicans</i> Trumpet vine	Herbaceous	Yellow, orange, red	July-Aug.	Can use as vine or ground cover; aggressive.
<i>Cotoneaster apiculatus</i> Cranberry cotoneaster	Herbaceous	Pink	May-June	Attractive, red fruit; maroon fall color.
<i>Duchesnea indica</i> Mock strawberry	Herbaceous	Yellow	May	Aggressive; bright red, inedible fruit.
<i>Juniperus communis</i> Common juniper	Woody, evergreen	—	—	Performs best in acidic soils.
<i>Lonicera japonica</i> 'Halliana' Hall's Japanese honeysuckle	Woody, evergreen	White-yellow	July-Aug.	Can use as vine or ground cover.
<i>Lysimachia nummularia</i> Moneywort	Herbaceous	Yellow	June-July	Aggressive; prefers moist soil.
<i>Parthenocissus quinquefolia</i> Virginia creeper	Woody	—	—	Can use as vine or groundcover; aggressive; red fall color; commonly sold variety is 'Engelmannii.'
<i>Parthenocissus tricuspidata</i> Boston ivy	Woody	—	—	Can use as a clinging vine or ground cover; aggressive; red fall color.
<i>Potentilla tabernaemontani</i> Spring cinquefoil	Herbaceous	Yellow	May-June	Fast spreading in moist soil.
<i>Prunella grandiflora</i> Self-heal	Herbaceous	Purple, rose, white	June-July	Dense mat; several varieties.
<i>Teucrium chamaedrys</i> Germander	Woody, evergreen	Pink-purple	June-July	Dark green leaves; erect stems; can be sheared.

Table 3: Selected ground covers for part to deep shade.

Plant Name	Type	Flower Color	Bloom Time	Remarks
Small areas — under 50 sq. ft.				
<i>Ajuga reptans</i> Carpet bugle	Herbaceous	Blue/pink, white/purple	May-June	Varieties include 'Atropurpurea,' 'Burgundy Glow' and 'Silver Beauty.'
<i>Convallaria majalis</i> Lily-of-the-valley	Herbaceous	White	May-June	Drooping, fragrant flowers.
<i>Hosta</i> spp. Hosta, plantain lily	Herbaceous	Lilac to white	July-Aug.	Many varieties; primarily grown for foliage effect.
<i>Sagina subulata</i> Pearlwort, Irish moss	Herbaceous, evergreen	White	May-June	Dense, moss-like mat; moist soil.
<i>Viola cornuta</i> Tufted pansy	Herbaceous	Violet	May-June	Many varieties with various flower colors; moist soil.
<i>Viola odorata</i> Sweet violet	Herbaceous	Violet	May-June	Several varieties; potentially invasive.
Large areas — greater than 50 sq. ft.				
<i>Aegopodium podagraria</i> , 'Variegatum'	Herbaceous	White	June-July	Looks best in moist soil; grown for foliage effect; invasive.
Bishop's weed, goutweed				
<i>Arctostaphylos uva-ursi</i> Kinnikinnick	Woody, evergreen	Light pink	April-May	Native; prefers acid soil; bright red fruits; glossy, evergreen leaves turn copper-red in fall.
<i>Euonymus fortunei</i> 'Colorata'	Woody, evergreen	—	—	Foliage turns purple through winter; many other varieties.
Purpleleaf wintercreeper				
<i>Galium odoratum</i> Sweet woodruff	Herbaceous	White	May-June	Fragrant; aggressive.
<i>Hedera helix</i> English ivy	Woody, evergreen	—	—	Can use as clinging vine or groundcover; aggressive; foliage may winterburn on exposed sites.
<i>Lamium maculatum</i> Spotted dead nettle	Herbaceous	Pink, white	April-June	Many varieties; most with variegated foliage.
<i>Mahonia repens</i> Creeping Oregon grape	Woody, evergreen	Yellow	April-May	Spiny foliage turns reddish purple in fall; may winterburn on exposed sites; blue, grape-like fruits.
<i>Pachysandra terminalis</i> Japanese spurge	Herbaceous, evergreen	White	April-May	Glossy foliage; needs moist, acidic soil.
<i>Ranunculus repens</i> Creeping buttercup	Herbaceous	Yellow	May-June	Needs moist soil; potentially invasive.
<i>Vinca minor</i> Periwinkle	Herbaceous	Blue	May-June	Several varieties; best in moist soil and deep shade.

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