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COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION SERVICE

Ground cover selection and use

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no. 7.400

Quick Facts

- A year-round, attractive appearance is a prime consideration in selecting a ground cover.
- A ground cover should have the capability of spreading by itself.
- A ground cover should be low in growth and dense enough to keep out weeds.
- A ground cover that is to be used to control erosion on a steep slope should have a dense, fibrous root system.
- Most ground covers are no more than 12 inches (30.5 cm) in height.
- Walkways should be built through areas of heavy traffic before planting a ground cover.
- Well-rotted manure or some other type of organic material should be incorporated into heavy soils.
- Maintenance problems should be considered when selecting a ground cover. Evergreens require the least amount of maintenance.

Ground cover plants play a leading role in modern day landscaping. They help soften harsh, otherwise barren areas, provide a neat, tidy look and link landscape plantings together. They are important in reducing soil erosion on slopes and in controlling weeds. They can be substituted for lawn grasses where these would be hard to mow or do not thrive.

Qualities

A ground cover should have an attractive appearance during every season while giving year-round soil cover. Evergreens do this best. However, because of site limitations or because special effects are desired, flowering plants are sometimes used.

A ground cover should have the capability of spreading by itself. Species that produce rhizomes or stolons, or spread by offset or tip layering, are best suited for ground cover. They will develop rapidly into a dense cover.

A ground cover should be low in growth and sufficiently dense to prevent competition from weeds. If the ground cover is to be used to prevent soil erosion on a steep slope, the plant selected should have a naturally heavy, fibrous root system.

Considerations Before Selection

No one species of ground cover will provide the solution to every landscape problem. The following factors should be considered before selecting a ground cover for a specific situation:

- To maintain balance in a small area, low-growing ground covers are best. In larger areas, or on an extensive steep slope, plants taller than 12 inches (30.5 centimeters) can be used.
- The plant should be selected for the proper exposure. The amount of sun versus shade and the exposure to winter sun and winds is an important consideration in selecting ground cover.
- Steep grades require species that have dense, fibrous roots that will hold the soil.
- Most ground covers will not tolerate trampling. If pedestrian traffic is anticipated, a walk of concrete or stepping stones should be placed through the area before planting the ground cover.
- Heavy clay soils underlying the surface soils should be conditioned with organic material before planting. Two cubic yards (1.5 cu meters) of well rotted manure or peat moss should be incorporated into each 1,000 square feet (92.9 sq m).

Maintenance

No ground cover planting can be completely neglected. However, some species have fewer maintenance problems than others. 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.

Table 1 provides a list of ground cover plants according to site requirements. Only species suitable for difficult sites and exposures are included.

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Table 1: Selected ground covers for specific site requirements.

Small areas—under 100 sq ft (9.3 sq m)	*Large areas—over 100 sq ft (9.3 sq m)*
Hot, dry and sunny exposures	
Soils shallow, low in organic matter, dry quickly	
Achillea tomentosa - Woolly Yarrow	Caragana microphylla - Littleleaf Peashrub
Allysum saxatile - Goldentuft	Juniperus squamata prostrata - Prostrate Single-seed Juniper
Arabis alpina - Rockcress	Potentilla fruticosa - Cinquefoil
Artemisia "Silver Mound" - Wormwood	
Cerastium tomentosum - Snow-in-Summer	
Euphorbia spp. - Spurge	
Saponaria ocymoides - Soapwort	
Sedum spp. - Stonecrop	
Sempervivum spp. - Houseleek	
Sunny exposures	
Soils deep, moderate to high in organic matter, do not dry quickly	
Campanula carpatica - Carpathian Harebell	Cornus stolonifera - Red-osier Dogwood
Dianthus spp. - Pinks	Cotoneaster horizontalis - Rock Cotoneaster
Heuchera sanguinea - Coralbell	Forsythia suspensa - Weeping Forsythia
*Iberis sempervivens - Candytuft	Lonicera japonica "Halls" - Hall's Japanese Honeysuckle
Phlox subulata - Creeping Phlox	Juniperus horizontalis - vars. - Creeping Juniper
Viola cornuta - Tufted Pansy	
Vinca minor - Common Periwinkle (difficult to establish under dry conditions)	
Deep to moderate shade	
Areas such as under trees or north side of buildings	
Ajuga spp. - Bugles	**Arctostaphylos uva-ursi - Kinnikinnik
Convallaria majalis - Lily-of-the-Valley	*Euonymus fortunei - vars. - Creeping Euonymus
Epimedium alpinum - Alpine Epi-medium	**Juniperus communis - Rocky Mountain Juniper
*Hedera helix - English Ivy	
Vinca minor - Common Periwinkle (difficult to establish under dry conditions)	

**Foliage may "burn" in winter and sun drying winds*
***Performs best in acid soils*