

GROWING GROUND COVERS

If thinking about the traditional ground covers conjures up images of pachysandra, periwinkle (*Vinca*), ivy and bugleweed (*Ajuga*), perhaps this article will help you create another mental image. Imagine these spaces in your landscape now sporting great spring or summer blooms, outstanding fall color or captivating winter character. Perhaps these spaces are replacing turf areas you no longer wish to mow, such as a steep bank or a shady back-lot corner. Sound enticing? The use of ground covers is limited only by your imagination.

Let's start by thinking of the role ground covers play in the landscape. Simply stated, the plant has to cover the ground – size makes no difference. Ground covers can help prevent weeds, control erosion, bring beauty to the landscape and can be grown with very little maintenance, once established. Ground covers may be woody, succulent, herbaceous or grass-like. Some may have evergreen character and some are deciduous.

By using a combination of plants, gardeners can weave an interesting tapestry that is both functional and natural looking. A woodland landscape covered with the fragile, white blooms of foamflower (*Tiarella*), contrasting with the rich purples of native phlox and coral bells (*Heuchera*,) will give a dark environment waves of light, color and texture. Many ground cover plants are selected for their spreading underground growth habit. This growth habit gives them the upper hand at out-competing weedy growth. Ground covers with a more clumping form such as hosta can also be planted in masses, which over time essentially accomplish the same thing.

The first rule for selecting ground covers is matching the plant's needs to your site and keeping the number of cultivars you choose, relatively few. Combining too many different types will cause the landscape to appear busy and cluttered.

Rule two takes into consideration the proper use of coarse- and fine-textured plants. Large-leaved plants such as pipsqueak (*Bergenia*) and wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*) are more effective when combined with fine-textured plants such as *Astilbe* or ferns.

Try to choose plants that will comfortably coexist with each other. For instance, two surface rooting perennial ground covers will compete with each other, but if one is deeply rooted, taking advantage of moisture and nutrients, while the other plant's roots are shallow, allowing it to intercept brief rain showers, they can happily co-mingle. Similarly, if you combine a ground cover species such as goutweed (*Aegopodium*

podagraria 'Variegatum') or English ivy (*Hedera helix*) with a non-aggressive plant such as dwarf astilbe, the weaker of the two will be completely over run.

Ground cover plants often grow where grass will not. These locations range from areas with dense shade to banks that are too steep to mow. Groundcovers are low growing, quick spreading plants. Plant them in cool, moist weather in early spring, or during September rains. Spacing for ground covers depends on the average mature size of the plant. In general, place ground cover plants about as far apart each way as they grow in height.

Getting ground cover plants established can often be a challenge. You can plan on almost 2 years to achieve a compact, uniform cover. Most ground covers take a lot of time to plant and must be weeded by hand for the first 2 years to obtain good clean beds. Once established, little weeding will be required. Water thoroughly once a week until established. The planting will benefit from a high nitrogen fertilizer applied in early spring.

Some ground covers are rampant growers and may become problems. Try planting such ground covers within barriers to keep them from invading lawn and garden areas. Railroad ties are often ineffective as ground covers will jump over or crawl under and between them.

Good herbaceous ground covers for sunny locations include creeping phlox with pink spring flowers and dwarf veronicas with pink or blue flowers. Sedums have yellow or pink flowers and a rampant growth habit. Spice dianthus has fragrant flowers.

Ground covers preferring shade include English Ivy, Euonymus, pachysandra, and periwinkle.

[MSU Extension](#) - Smart Gardeners Replace Worn Out Turf with Thrifty Ground Covers

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