



Ground Cover Plants

Fact Sheet No. 7.400

Gardening Series | Yard

by J.E. Klett and R.A. Cox*

A ground cover should spread by itself. Species that produce rhizomes or stolons or that spread by offsets or tip layering are good choices for ground covers. Ideally, 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 and extensive root system.

Considerations

- Control existing weeds before planting ground covers. Weeds may reduce the attractiveness of the ground cover or compete with it for resources such as water and nutrients. No one species of ground cover plant works for every landscape situation. 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 foot area.

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 if not managed properly.

See Tables 1-3,
pages 2-5.



Quick Facts

- Ground covers help link together ornamental plants.
- Plants that are low-growing (generally less than 12 inches) and spread easily are suitable as ground cover plants.
- Ideally, a ground cover should be dense enough to inhibit weed emergence.
- 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.

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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 ageratifolia</i> Greek yarrow	Herbaceous	White	June-Aug.	Short (4-6") and spreading; gray-green foliage.
<i>Achillea tomentosa</i> Woolly yarrow	Herbaceous	Yellow	June-Aug.	Poor soil; woolly foliage; spreading.
<i>Anacyclus pyrethrum depressus</i> Mount Atlas daisy	Herbaceous	White	April-May	White daisies with red undersides; silvery foliage.
<i>Antennaria dioica</i> Pussytoes	Herbaceous	White to pink	May-June	Native; silver gray, mat-like foliage; unique flowers.
<i>Arabis caucasica</i> Rockcress	Herbaceous, evergreen	White to pink	April-May	Soft, gray, spreading foliage, varieties include 'Snow Drop' and 'Little Treasure Deep Rose'
<i>Arenaria montana</i> Mountain sandwort	Herbaceous	White	May-June	Covered in flowers; trailing habit.
<i>Artemisia schmidtiana</i> 'Silver Mound' Silver mound sage	Herbaceous	Unimportant	—	Mounded, feathery, aromatic, silver-gray foliage.
<i>Artemisia stelleriana</i> 'Silver Brocade' Silver brocade sage	Herbaceous	Unimportant	—	Finely-cut, velvety silver foliage; mat forming.
<i>Artemisia versicolor</i> 'Sea Foam' Sea Foam Sage	Woody	Unimportant	—	Finely dissected silver foliage, Plant Select®
<i>Aurinia saxatilis</i> (<i>Alyssum saxatile</i>) Basket-of-gold	Herbaceous	Yellow	April-May	Shear after bloom.
<i>Coreopsis auriculata</i> 'Nora' Dwarf coreopsis	Herbaceous	Orange, yellow	June-Sept.	Mounding habit with slender leaves.
<i>Penstemon pinifolius</i> Pineleaf penstemon	Herbaceous, evergreen	Reddish- orange, yellow	June-Sept.	Needle-like, evergreen foliage.
<i>Saponaria ocyroides</i> Rock soapwort	Herbaceous	Pink, White	May-July	Shear after bloom.
<i>Sedum acre</i> Goldmoss sedum	Herbaceous, evergreen	Yellow	May-June	Low growing; succulent, dark green leaves.
<i>Sedum kamschaticum</i> Kamschatka sedum	Herbaceous, evergreen	Orange, yellow	July-Aug.	Scalloped, succulent, green leaves.
<i>Sedum reflexum</i> 'Blue Spruce' Blue Spruce Sedum	Herbaceous, evergreen	Yellow	July-Aug.	Blue green needle-like leaves.
<i>Sedum spurium</i> Sedum, stonecrop	Herbaceous, evergreen	Red	July-Aug.	Succulent leaves; commonly sold varieties are 'Dragon's Blood', Tricolor' and 'John Creech'
<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.
<i>Tanacetum densum amani</i> Partridge feather	Herbaceous	Yellow	May-June	Finely-cut, silvery-white foliage, Plant Select® 2010
<i>Thymus praecox</i> Creeping thyme	Herbaceous	Pink, red, white	June-July	Low growing, evergreen foliage. Varieties include 'Pink Chintz'.
<i>Verbena canadensis</i> Verbena	Herbaceous	Purple	July-Sept.	Vigorous groundcover; common variety 'Homestead Purple.'
<i>Zauschneria garrettii</i> 'PWWG01S' Hummingbird trumpet Orange Carpet®	Herbaceous	Red, orange	Aug.-Oct.	Gray-green leaves; good for attracting hummingbirds, Plant Select® 2001.
Large areas – greater than 50 sq. ft.				
<i>Artemisia frigida</i> Fringed sage	Herbaceous	Yellow	Aug.-Sept.	Fringed, silvery-gray foliage; good for naturalized areas.
<i>Callirhoe involucrata</i> Poppy mallow, winecups	Herbaceous	Reddish-purple	June-Aug.	Trailing stems with saucer-like flowers; Plant Select® 1999.
<i>Cerastium tomentosum</i> Snow-in-summer	Herbaceous	White	May-June	Aggressive; shear after bloom.
<i>Delosperma</i> hybrids Ice plant	Herbaceous, evergreen	Various	May-June	Several varieties with various flower colors. Several Plant Select® introductions.
<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. Some varieties available.
<i>Fragaria vesca</i> Wild strawberry	Herbaceous	White, pink	May-June	Native strawberry; small edible berries.
<i>Juniperus horizontalis</i> Creeping juniper	Woody, evergreen	Unimportant	—	Several low-growing varieties including 'Bar Harbor,' 'Blue Chip,' 'Prince of Wales' and 'Wiltonii.'
<i>Juniperus sabina</i> Savin juniper	Woody, evergreen	Unimportant	—	Several low-growing varieties including 'Broadmoor,' 'Buffalo,' and 'Scandia.'

Table 1 (cont.). Selected ground covers for hot, dry, sunny exposures.

Plant Name	Type	Flower Color	Bloom Time	Remarks
<i>Oenothera speciosa</i> Mexican evening primrose	Herbaceous	Pink	June-Oct.	Spreads quickly, may become invasive.
<i>Polygonum cuspidatum</i> 'Compactum' Japanese fleece flower	Herbaceous	Pink	Aug.-Sept.	Aggressive; thick, green leaves with red veins; red fall color; excellent ground cover for dry areas.
<i>Potentilla neumanniana</i> Creeping cinquefoil	Herbaceous	Yellow	May-Aug.	Bright green foliage; spreads quickly.
<i>Prunus besseyi</i> 'PO11S' Pawnee Buttes® sandcherry	Woody	White	April-May	Same species as native sandcherry but with a low, spreading habit; orange/red fall color; Plant Select®.
<i>Rhus aromatica</i> 'Gro-Low' Gro-Low fragrant sumac	Woody	Yellow	March-April	Vibrant orange-red fall color; very drought tolerant.

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>Armeria maritima</i> Sea pink	Herbaceous, evergreen	Pink, white, purple	May-June	Grass-like foliage; several varieties.
<i>Aubrieta deltoidea</i> Rockcress	Herbaceous	Purple, blue, red	May-June	Several varieties; mat-like foliage.
<i>Bergenia crassifolia</i> 'Winterglut' Winter glow bergenia	Herbaceous	Pink	April-May	Low, cabbage-like foliage.
<i>Campanula poscharskyana</i> Adriatic bluebells	Herbaceous	Blue	May-June	Spreads quickly; good for rock gardens.
<i>Ceratostigma plumbaginoides</i> Plumbago	Herbaceous	Dark blue	Aug.-Sept.	Attractive green foliage turns red in fall.
<i>Dianthus deltoideus</i> Maiden Pink	Herbaceous	Red	May-June	Dark green foliage; mat-like. Varieties include 'Zing Rose', 'Brilliant'. Several varieties available.
<i>Festuca glauca</i> Blue fescue	Herbaceous	Unimportant	—	Silvery-blue clump grass.
<i>Geranium cinereum</i> Cranesbill	Herbaceous	Pink, purple	May-July	Leaves are deeply divided; clump forming.
<i>Geranium dalmaticum</i> Compact rose geranium	Herbaceous	Pink	May-June	Foliage turns red in fall.
<i>Geranium x cantabrigiense</i> 'Biokovo' Biokovo cranesbill	Herbaceous	Pink, white	May-July	Foliage turns red in fall.
<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. Many newer varieties selected for foliage colors.
<i>Iberis sempervirens</i> Candytuft	Herbaceous, evergreen	White	May-June	Dark green, needle-like foliage.
<i>Persicaria affinis</i> Himalayan border jewel	Herbaceous	Pink	Aug.-Sept.	Mat-like foliage becomes copper-red in fall.
<i>Phlox subulata</i> Creeping phlox	Herbaceous, evergreen	Pink, white, lavender	March-May	Several varieties; needle-like foliage.
<i>Potentilla nepalensis</i> 'Miss Willmott' Miss Willmott cinquefoil	Herbaceous	Rose, red	June-July	Strawberry-like leaves.
<i>Thymus x citriodorus</i> Lemon thyme	Herbaceous, evergreen	Purple	June-July	Lemon-scented foliage. Several varieties available.
<i>Thymus praecox pseudolanuginosus</i> Woolly thyme	Herbaceous, evergreen	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 austriaca</i> 'Crater Lake Blue' Crater Lake Blue speedwell	Herbaceous,	Blue	June-July	Shiny leaves on mounded clumps
<i>Veronica filiformis</i> Birdseye speedwell	Herbaceous	Blue	June-Aug.	Grows quickly in dry conditions.
<i>Veronica</i> hybrids Speedwells	Herbaceous, evergreen	Blue, white	May-June	Several varieties are Plant Select® introductions.
<i>Veronica liwanensis</i> Turkish veronica	Herbaceous	Blue	May-June	Low growing; dark green leaves; Plant Select® 1997.
<i>Veronica pectinata</i> Woolly veronica	Herbaceous	Lavender	May-June	Low growing; gray foliage; evergreen some winters.
<i>Veronica peduncularis</i> Speedwell	Herbaceous	Blue	May-June	Commonly sold variety is 'Georgia Blue'
<i>Veronica prostrata</i> Prostrate speedwell	Herbaceous	Blue to purple	May-June	Dense mats.

Table 2 (cont.). Selected ground covers for sun to part shade.

Plant Name	Type	Flower Color	Bloom Time	Remarks
<i>Veronica repens</i> Creeping speedwell	Herbaceous	Blue to purple	May-June	Dense mats.
<i>Veronica spicata</i> 'Red Fox' Red Fox speedwell	Herbaceous	Rose-red	May-June	Flower spikes rise above clumps of dark green leaves.
<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	Compact growth habit; fruit inedible.
Large areas – greater than 50 sq. ft.				
<i>Cotoneaster apiculatus</i> Cranberry cotoneaster	Woody	Pink	May-June	Attractive, mounded habit, red fruit; maroon fall color.
<i>Cotoneaster dammeri</i> 'Coral Beauty' Coral Beauty cotoneaster	Woody	White, pink	May-June	Bronze fall color; abundant orange-red fruit, best in protected spots.
<i>Cotoneaster horizontalis</i> Rock cotoneaster	Woody	Pink	April-May	Semi-evergreen; small rounded leaves with red-bronze fall color. Best in protected spots.
<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. Common clones include: Alpine Carpet®, Blueberry Delight®, and 'Ettusa'®.
<i>Lonicera japonica</i> 'Halliana' Hall's honeysuckle	Woody, evergreen	White, yellow	July-Aug.	Can use as vine or aggressive ground cover.
<i>Lysimachia nummularia</i> Moneywort	Herbaceous	Yellow	June-July	Prefers moist soil but can become aggressive.
<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 neumanniana</i> Creeping potentilla	Herbaceous	Yellow	May-Aug.	Commonly sold variety is 'Nana'.
<i>Prunella grandiflora</i> Self-heal	Herbaceous	Purple, rose, white	June-July	Dense mat, several varieties.
<i>Prunella laciniata</i> Lacy self heal	Herbaceous	Pink		Fuzzy evergreen foliage.
<i>Teucrium chamaedrys</i> Germander	Woody, evergreen	Pink, purple	June-July	Dark green leaves; erect stems; can be sheared.
<i>Symphoricarpos x chenaulti</i> 'Hancock' Hancock coralberry	Woody	Pink, white	June-Aug.	Can spread to 12'; stems root where they touch the ground.

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', 'Chocolate Chip', and 'Silver Beauty'.
<i>Brunnera macrophylla</i> 'Jack Frost' Jack Frost Siberian Bugloss	Herbaceous	Blue	May-June	Large heart-shaped silver leaves with green veins.
<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>Lamium galeobdolon</i> Archangel	Herbaceous	Yellow	May-June	Silver-flecked foliage; commonly sold variety is 'Herman's' Pride'.
<i>Paxistima cambyi</i> Mountain lover	Woody, evergreen	—	—	Small shrub; prostrate growth.
<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 corsica</i> Corsican violet	Herbaceous	Violet	May-August	Can tolerate some drought, reseeds moderately, Plant Select® 2003.
<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' Snow-on-the-mountain or Bishop's goutweed	Herbaceous	White	June-July	Looks best in moist soil; grown for foliage effect; invasive, aggressive.
<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> 'Coloratus' Purpleleaf wintercreeper	Woody, evergreen	—	—	Foliage turns purple through winter; many other varieties.

Table 3 (cont.). Selected ground covers for part to deep shade.

Plant Name	Type	Flower Color	Bloom Time	Remarks
<i>Galium odoratum</i> Sweet woodruff	Herbaceous	White	May-June	Fragrant foliage; aggressive.
<i>Glechoma hederacea</i> Ground ivy	Herbaceous	Blue, purple	May-July	Member of the mint family; aggressive; variegated varieties available.
<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 deadnettle	Herbaceous	Pink, white	April-June	Many varieties, including 'Beacon Silver', 'Lemon Frost', 'Purple Dragon', and 'White Nancy'; most with variegated foliage.
<i>Mahonia repens</i> Creeping Oregon grape	Woody, evergreen	Yellow	April-May	Native; 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; prefers moist, acidic soil.