

What are Ground Covers?

No category of plants works harder than ground covers to help a gardener create a beautiful yet low-maintenance landscape. Ground covers are low growing plants that are used in the landscape. They are commonly used as mass plantings for covering large areas of land. A ground cover would be used in an area that grass is not desired, or that is too shady for grass to even grow in. In both natural and man-made instances, ground cover helps in the prevention of soil erosion by using a complex root structure to hold soil in place.

Groundcovers not only solve problems but also unify different components in the landscape. Non-spreading types of groundcovers can be used as hedging material, traffic barriers or just visual guides toward an entry. They **soften hardscapes such as walks, steps, and driveways.**

Groundcovers help to define space. A low groundcover can provide a transition between the lawn and taller plants used in beds. Attractive foliage, colorful flowers, and, at times attractive fruit can add color and texture to an otherwise "green" landscape.

Groundcovers create various moods. Small leaved, smooth textured groundcovers used in broad curved plantings can convey a feeling of spaciousness. Whereas large leaved coarse textured groundcovers create a feeling of closeness.

Ground Covers: Design Details

Ground covers are perennial plants or, sometimes, low-growing shrubs that form a stable, solid mat of growth, replacing either lawn or garden beds. It is best not to mix too many kinds of ground covers into the same area, for they will spread and become intermixed in a way that is hard to handle.

We can't give you a list of all possible ground-cover plants. Ground covering is a way of using plants, not the plants themselves. To function well, a ground cover should grow thickly enough to block out most competing weeds, look good for all or most of the year, prevent erosion, and not be in constant need of repositioning.

Use groundcovers for problem areas and to unify divergent components of the landscape. They can be used as traffic barriers, visual guides and to define space.

- Use low groundcovers for a transition between the lawn area and taller plants in the garden bed.
- Try groundcovers where lawn grass either won't grow or is too difficult to maintain such as in very small, confined landscapes.
- Select groundcovers based upon their ability to add year-round beauty to the landscape. Herbaceous groundcovers die back to the ground in the winter, exposing bare soil. If this is not the look you want, choose evergreen groundcovers.
- Select groundcovers, according to your site's conditions: Sun or shade? Clay soil or sand? Moist or dry? Select groundcovers that will survive and thrive under your conditions; not require heroic measures to keep them alive!
- Moss as a groundcover? Sure! While heavy, dense shade is often considered a curse, it is a blessing when it comes to moss. The color and texture of moss can add great interest. And, it's virtually maintenance free.
- Consider the height of the groundcover. Will you choose a six-inch Ajuga or a four-foot fern?
- Before planting, always prepare the soil as you would for any other permanent type of planting. Remember, groundcovers are capable of giving long lasting beauty and function, but their performance is only as good as the effort one puts into soil preparation.
- Beware of groundcovers that state, "Easy, rapid coverage in either sun, shade, wet or dry." They may be horticultural nightmares due to their aggressive nature. If you need fast coverage, closer planting of better-behaved groundcovers may be the better answer.
- Groundcovers are not the "bottom feeders" of the landscape. They add interest, and bring unity to the garden making them the unsung heroes among the more horticulturally prominent members of the garden

Site and Soil Preparation

As with any permanent landscape planting, time spent preparing the site pays off. Pay special attention to removing weeds, especially perennial weeds, from the bed prior to planting. Grass and weeds may be killed by using a systemic non-selective herbicide or by covering the area with a sheet of black plastic for 1-3 months.

If using herbicide, follow all label directions for timing of application, mixing, and applying. If this is not done, the weeds will grow back, compete with the new plantings and result in poor and slower establishment of the groundcover. Once the weeds have been killed, they may be tilled into the soil. (Remove any seed heads before tilling.) Till the area to a depth of 6-8 inches, adding organic matter to help improve the soil.

Apply one to two pounds of 5-10-5 or similar fertilizer per 100 square feet. After the site is prepared, and if practical, leave the area unplanted for about 2-3 weeks. During this time, any perennial weeds not eliminated will regrow and can easily be removed. This helps to reduce any major invasion of weeds after the area has been planted.

Planting

Plant most groundcovers in the spring or fall. Summer planting requires more attention to watering. Fall planted groundcovers may require mulching to prevent frost heaving of the plants. Spacing of plants depends on the plant's habit, rate of growth, cost and how fast the area needs to be covered. In general, space faster growing groundcovers further apart than slow growing types. Plant groundcovers in a staggered or diamond pattern for best results. When planting on slopes, mulch the area after planting or plant through fiber netting to help hold the soil in place. Allow at least one to two growing seasons for the area to become completely established. Perennial ground covers come in a variety of styles. The addition of perennial ground covers to a garden enhance the look and feel of the garden for years, while also serving practical purposes such as preventing soil erosion and providing a habitat for insects and small animals. Using perennial ground covers will save gardener money each year, as much less mulch is needed to fill in the empty areas.

Ground Cover Care

Maintenance of ground covers varies depending on the ground cover chosen to use. Proper maintenance will ensure fast growth, rapid coverage and a wonderful appearance. Recently planted ground cover should have light mulch applied to it. This will conserve moisture and help to thwart the growth of weeds. Proper watering and fertilization are also extremely important to the maintenance of good ground cover. Another important part of ground cover care is adequate water. Each breed of ground cover requires differing amounts of water, and some may die if given too much. Ground cover care goes far beyond watering. Fertilizer will help many ground covers to spread more rapidly and fully. Propagation by dividing ground cover will also aid in the spreading of some of the slower growing ground covers.

Weed Control

The most critical step to weed control occurs during bed preparation before the plants are planted. Eliminate all perennial weeds in the bed at the time of soil preparation. During establishment, achieve weed control by frequent shallow cultivation and hand pulling. Adding one to two inches of mulch reduces weed growth and keeps the soil moist. Some ground covers may need occasional pruning to maintain them within the space provided. Pruning older stems will allow young, more vigorous and attractive foliage to grow back into the area. Groundcover plants, when properly taken care of, provide dense soil cover, retard weed growth, and prevent soil erosion.

Popular Types of Ground Covers

One very easy to care for perennial ground cover is the **Phlox subulata**. This perennial ground cover features pretty flowers and a thick mat of semi-evergreen foliage. This perennial groundcover produces flowers, which bloom from April to May. This perennial ground cover requires full sun and well-drained soil.

Another perennial ground cover is the **Liriope**. This perennial ground cover is often call border grass, but is actually a member of the lily family. **Liriope** grows in large clumps of grass-like leaves and spread to merge into one large bed of wiry looking grass. Spikes of small white to purple flowers rise from the center of clumps in the summer depending on the variety. This perennial ground cover spreads very quickly and should be trimmed down in the winter to encourage new growth.

A third perennial ground cover is **Ophiopogon** or **Mondo Grass**. This perennial ground cover is an ornamental grass. Closely related to liriope, this perennial ground cover has tiny lavender flowers on short stalks that bloom in the summer. This evergreen perennial ground cover grows in medium wet, well-drained soil in part shade to full sun. This plant is not tolerant of full sun.

Some of our most popular varieties include:

Ajuga Bronze Bugle
Ajuga Burgundy Glow
Algerian Ivy
Algerian Ivy-Variegated
Baltic Ivy
English Ivy
English Ivy - Anne Marie
English Ivy - Glacier
English Ivy - Gold Child
English Ivy - Needlepoint
Euonymus coloratus
Iberis sempervirens Snowflake
Isotoma fluviatalis
Liriope m. Big Blue
Liriope m. Majestic
Liriope m. Monroe White
Liriope m. Royal Purple
Liriope m. Variegata
Liriope s. Silver Dragon
Liriope spicata
Ophiopogon p. Ebony Knight
Ophiopogon j. Common Mondo
Ophiopogon j. Kyoto Super Dwarf
Ophiopogon j. Nana Dwarf Mondo
Ophiopogon j. Silver Mist
Pachysandra terminalis
Thymus pseudolanuginosus
Thymus s. Coccineus
Vinca major Variegated
Vinca minor
Vinca minor Bowles