



GROUND COVERS

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Grass has to be the most popular and valuable groundcover for its ability to take traffic. Not all ground cover, however, needs to take traffic. A perfect lawn of grass neatly clipped is a relatively new idea. It originates from large estates in England where deer or sheep were used to manicure (and probably fertilize) large areas. Groundskeepers were eventually used to maintain a similar look, and with the advent of chemicals and mechanized equipment, we adopted this look in our home gardens. But a manicured turf is not necessary or desirable particularly where there is little foot traffic.

Also, grass isn't happy in very shady areas, on steep slopes, or in the root-filled areas beneath trees. There are many low maintenance groundcovers that can be used as alternatives to lawn and a great variety are available for these problem areas. They will create interest and contrast in the garden, and they can eliminate work.

When choosing a groundcover, you need to ask a number of questions. How much moisture, drainage, sun or shade is there? How fast do you want the groundcover to spread? Do you want it to stay green in the winter? How tall do you want it to grow? What is the size of the area to cover? This will determine the scale and the size and height of plants that are appropriate. Do you want it to flower?

You can get groundcovers from most garden centres. Look for end of season sales. You can also get groundcover plants from other gardeners who are usually more than happy to share as they thin out and control their own gardens. Ground Covers Unlimited in Bethany or Richters in Goodwood north of Pickering provide plugs or flats of plants.

When planting, first make sure the area is weed free and well prepared, since it will be difficult to adjust after the plants begin to fill in. Lots of compost is the best long-term source of nutrients. The spacing of plants depends on the plant and it is good to get advice from the supplier on this. You will need to keep the plants moist until established and may need to weed more at the beginning until they grow together. Mulch might help between the plants to maintain moisture and keep the weeds down while they are growing together.

A large area of one type of plant can look boring but you can avoid this by adding objects of art

or individual plants as focal points in the groundcover area. You can also use several areas of different groundcovers to add interest. You might need to put in barriers to keep them apart. You also may need to contain the groundcovers with barriers so that they do not take over the rest of the garden.

Groundcovers are usually low-growing spreading perennials or small shrubs. However, many garden perennials work well such as hostas, daylilies and ornamental grasses depending on location and soil type.

Vinca is among the most popular because it is easy to establish, grows well in sun or deep shade and bulbs or other plants combine well with it. Vinca has a variegated yellow and green leaf variety which is less aggressive. Another undemanding plant with similar shining leaves is Pachysandra (called Japanese spurge because it is native to the mountains of Japan). Several new pachysandra cultivars are now available and they too grow in full sun or deep shade. Cuttings can be taken from any of these plants and they are easy to establish.

Goutweed, or Bishop's weed (*Aegopodium podagravia*) can be a good groundcover as it spreads quickly but it is almost impossible to get rid of once established. Its invasive nature is curbed slightly when grown in deep shade. *Cerastium tomentosum* (snow in summer) is also a rampant grower but it too can fill in an area attractively. Use these two with great care! Perhaps lily of the valley also falls into this grower-beware category.

For erosion control, consider cotoneaster, euonymus, vinca or in full sun cutleaf *Stephanandra*. Depending on the area, ferns, although tall work well. Creeping Jenny (especially the gold form), lamiums or ajuga, lamb's ears---all are attractive, easy and versatile in the right setting. Creeping or woolly thyme work well in areas of full sun with dry poor soil that drains well. Thyme can handle light foot traffic and works well between stepping stones. Good only in a shady area is one of my favourites, Sweet Woodruff with dainty white flowers and attractive form. For dry areas in partial shade there are two winners: *Epimedium* (barrenwort) or *Geranium macrorrhizum* (bigroot geranium).

If you want to establish ground cover, there is a plant for every kind of soil or location.

Now is a good time to consider putting in groundcover for 2009. The area in question can be made weed-free by covering it with black plastic to let the sun cook any unwanted growth. Choose your plant and start dividing and you will be all ready to create more interest and less work in the years to come.

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