

## ALTERNATIVE PERENNIAL GROUND COVERS

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I view my responsibility in accepting this opportunity to speak about alternative perennial ground covers for the landscape from two perspectives. Obviously, I must be informative and provide you with the information necessary to make knowledgeable plant selections. More importantly, I must motivate you. Because, what I am asking you to do is change. I am challenging you to alter your current grounds maintenance, turf management, and landscape practices to include plant materials that are unfamiliar to you. Change.....ugh! "Gary you are crazy, if it works...don't fix it"! Right now you are thinking "alright, get to the slides, tell us the plant names and let's go to lunch". If I do only that you will have lost an opportunity to expand your landscape's horizon. A horizon that many contend is limited by economics and the environment, but in reality is only truly limited by our imaginations. Perennial plant materials challenge the imagination, create opportunities, and contribute solutions to economic and environmental limitations.

Herbaceous perennials live from year to year, tolerate a wide range of growing conditions, are economical to install and require relatively low maintenance. With the ever-increasing emphasis on improved water quality, energy conservation, and reduced pesticide use we can easily identify the value of incorporating ground covers into our landscapes. In fact, many of us are familiar with and consistently use the more traditional ground covers to solve landscape problems. English Ivy, Euonymus, Vinca, and Pachysandra are solid contributors in many landscapes. Broadening our appreciation of the types of ground covers that are available can only enhance our ability to meet the demands of today's landscape under the restraints of economic and environmental limitations.

Practically, it is important that we select plant materials that can adapt to the surroundings. We have learned from the expense involved in creating a static environment for turfgrass species that, perhaps, there are areas where alternative ground covers are more appropriate. The ability of a ground cover to "naturalize" in the landscape without special care is a necessity. Naturalizing is when a few plants become many in harmony with existing flora and fauna. Many varieties of herbaceous ground covers naturalize readily without special long-term care. Proper selection from this varied list of perennial ground covers will find plants that tolerate the very moist to the very dry soil conditions. The list includes plants for sun and shade. The many combinations of environmental conditions that exist will not thwart your attempt to find a suitable perennial ground cover that satisfies the demand of almost any site.

The demands of the landscape site dictate the type of ground cover you may use. In addition, you must be aware of the aesthetic values that the individual species have to offer. Imagine, ground covers that respond to the demands of the site, solve maintenance problems and flower, too. Red, yellow, blue, pink, purple, white, a multitude of flower colors that, until now, have been reserved for the flowering annual that must be replanted every year. However, when selecting a herbaceous perennial ground cover try not to become

too enamored with the flower. As with most landscape plants, the bloom time is relatively short, therefore the plant must have other merits to warrant it's use. The ability to naturalize and yet, not become invasive, habit of growth, foliage texture, and foliage color all warrant consideration when thoroughly researching your plant selection. Even though the perennial ground covers are relatively disease and insect free I strongly suggest that when planting large areas that several species be used. Select species, which are compatible, but offer extended season of bloom and even contrasting foliage texture and color.

Selecting the proper species will be difficult at first because of lack of familiarity with the extensive list of varieties available. What you will find less difficult is the installation and care of these alternative ground covers. Site preparation is comparable to previous planting experiences. Plant materials are available in a variety of sizes from plugs to #2 nursery containers. The quart or 4.5" pot is a versatile size that contains an adequate root system to insure establishment of the plant. This larger size will enable you to install the plants on 18-24 inch centers, thus reducing the amount of plants you might need for a given site. A pre-emergent herbicide can be used with the initial planting and a maximum of two inches of mulch is recommended to reduce competition from weeds and conservation of moisture. Extended use of any herbicide is not recommended because the long-term effects to perennials have not been fully determined. Once you have established the planting you will find you have created a "stock source" for additional plantings. Many of the perennial ground covers can be divided and easily moved to a new location.

As a group of ornamental plants you will not find more tolerant and flexible plant species than the herbaceous perennials. The ground cover plants found in this group are no exception. In addition to their ability to survive a wide range of growing conditions their blossom and interesting foliage provide significant aesthetic contributions to any landscape. Your challenge is not to successfully use these alternative plant materials, because success is inherent with these selections. Your challenge is, quite simply, to change.

#### Literature Cited

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2. Still, S. M. 1988. Manual of herbaceous ornamental plants. Stipes Publishing Co.
3. Thomas, G. S. 1982. Perennial garden plants or the modern florilegium. J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd.
4. MacKenzie, D. S. 1989. Complete manual of perennial ground covers. Prentice-Hall, Inc.

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Aegopodium podagraria "Variegatum"  
 Ajuga reptans "Burgundy Glow"  
 Ajuga r. "Metallica Crispa"  
 Arabis alpina "Snowcap"  
 Arabis a. "Spring Charm"  
 Arenaria montana  
 Armeria maritima "Splendens"  
 Artemesia "Silver Mound"  
 Aubrietia "Purple Gem"  
 Bergenia cordifolia  
 Briza media  
 Campanula carpatica  
 Campanula poscharskyana  
 Cerastium tomentosum  
 Ceratostigma plumbaginoides  
 Dianthus deltoides "Fanal"  
 Dianthus caesius "Tiny Ruby"  
 Festuca ovina "Glauca"  
 Galium odoratum  
 Houttuynia cordata "Variegata"  
 Lamiastrum g. "Herman's Pride"  
 Lamiastrum g. "Variegatum"  
 Lamium maculatum "Aureum"  
 Lamium m. "Beacon Silver"  
 Lamium m. "Checquers"  
 Lamium m. "White Nancy"  
 Lathyrus latifolius  
 Lysimachia nummularia "Aurea"  
 Myosotis alpestris  
 Phlox subulata  
 Potentilla nepalensis "Miss Willmott"  
 Potentilla verna "Nana"  
 Sagina subulata  
 Sedum "Acre"  
 Sedum album "Murale"  
 Sedum ellacombianum  
 Sedum kamtschaticum "Variegatum"  
 Sedum reflexum  
 Sedum "Rosy Glow"  
 Sedum spurium "Dragon's Blood"  
 Sedum s. "Red Carpet"  
 Thymus citriodorus  
 Thymus lanuginosus  
 Thymus serpyllum