

Groundcovers for Special Situations

by Gary Knosher

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A well maintained turf is a compliment to any landscape. Turf's ability to withstand foot traffic and take mowing at low heights, yet look like a dense green carpet, certainly is desirable.

But there are situations where turf is not the answer. Perhaps soil conditions, or a dense shade hinder turf's performance. May be a steep slope makes mowing difficult or dangerous. These situations would lead to a cultural decision for using groundcovers over turf. In this brief article some of the problem areas will be identified and suggestions made as to what groundcover would do best in that situation.

When working with wet areas, consideration should be given to the degree of moisture present. If the area is submerged in water in the spring of the year, but bone dry in July and August, not many plants can survive these extremes. However, if the area stays consistently moist throughout the year (as it would on the edge of a pond), the Creeping Buttercup, *Ranunculus repens*, would be a good choice. This is a vigorously growing, herbaceous groundcover that takes full sun to partial shade. It grows to a height of 10 inches, with bright yellow flowers sticking above the foliage in May. Redosier Dogwood, *Cornus stolonifera*, would also do well on a stream bank or the edge of a pond. Cultivar variances give a choice of heights from 24 inches to six feet. Dogwood will tolerate sun or shade and have brightly colored twigs in winter. If the area is consistently moist throughout the year, but not wet, Plaintain Lily, *Hosta*, or Daylilies, *Hemerocallis*, would do well. *Hostas*, with their showy foliage, could be used in shady areas, while in full sun

or partial shade, *Hemerocallis* varieties offer a wide range of flower colors, heights and times.

Just the opposite of wet areas are sunny, dry locations. Once again, there are areas that are so dry nothing can survive. If the soil drains freely, the landscape contractor should do what he can to improve it by incorporating peat moss or other organic matter. Also, mulching with bark or compost will aid in soil moisture retention. The succulent nature of *Sedum* and *Sempervivum*, or Hens & Chicks, allows them to thrive in areas that are too dry for other plants. Both of these species have showy flowers ranging in color from yellow to white to deep red. Some varieties of *Sedum* such as *album*, *acre* and *sarmentosum* can become invasive, so they may need to be restrained. *Sedum* and *Sempervivum* are both good groundcovers for sunny, dry locations. Another plant, which has potential for this type of area is Pussytoes, *Antennaria roseum*. This plant forms a dense, even blue mat two to four inches tall, and has creamy white flower clusters in May. The plant is native to the Rocky Mountains and thrives in gravelly, poor soils. At the nursery, we are evaluating this plant for introduction in the near future. If the area being considered is well drained, but has no particular drought constrictions, Junipers will do very well. Groundcover-type Junipers come in all kinds of colors, textures and sizes. They offer evergreen foliage and are very winter hardy.

Problem areas with poor soils usually have heavy clay, compacted soils, rocky or gravelly soils low in organic matter. Before planting the landscape contractor should do what he can to improve soil tilth. Plants that can survive these conditions usually need to be vigorous growers. Crownvetch (*Coronilla varia*)

(cont'd. on page 19)

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(Groundcovers cont'd.)

and Birdfoot Trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) have been used by the highway departments for roadside plantings for many years. The plants' ability to grow in compacted soils, choke out weeds and provide good erosion control make them ideal for overpass plantings. However, because of their growth habit, they may not be attractive if used in the home landscape. Halls Honeysuckle vine, *Lonicera japonica halliana*, is a vigorously growing vine that overcomes poor soils. It has creamy white, fragrant flowers and a semi-evergreen habit if protected. The nodes of the vines will root wherever they touch the soil, making it good for bank plantings also. Variegated Goutweed, *Aegopodium podagraria variegata*, is a deeply rooted herbaceous groundcover that tolerates poor soils. Because of its vigorous nature, it may need to be restrained.

If the situation calls for erosion control on a bank, *Lonicera japonica halliana* or *Coronilla varia*, as mentioned before, could be used. Also *Juniperus horizontalis* varieties with their evergreen foliage and ability to root along stem make them a good choice. Purpleleaf Wintercreeper, *Euonymus fort. Col-oratus*, is an especially excellent groundcover for banks because of its persistent foliage (which turns purple in the winter), vigorous growth habit, and ability to root along the stem where it touches the soil. Low-spreading deciduous shrubs such as *Cotoneaster apiculata*, *Diervilla trifida* and *Rhus aromatica* would also be good choices. There are many plants that could be used for this purpose, it would just depend on the other cultural conditions and aesthetic requirements.

When the landscape situation calls for a barrier, there are plants that are good groundcovers, and also act as barriers because of their thorny nature. The Ornamental Raspberry, *Rubus illeceebrosus*, has a mature height of 18 to 24 inches. It is quite dense and thorny, making it difficult to walk through. Because of its vigorous growth rate and ability to spread by underground stolons, it also works well on bank plantings. The foliage is bright green and the plant has an herbaceous habit. However, the dried foliage and stems persist all winter, making it partially effective throughout the year. The flowers are white followed by a red raspberry-like fruit which is taken by the birds. Another plant which fits the bill is Memorial Rose *Rose Wichuriana*. It is a groundcover-type rose having a height of 6 to 12 inches and bright green glossy foliage. The flowers are white, single and about one inch in diameter. It is a vigorous grower with many thorns along the stem.

If the area is too shady for turf, there are many groundcovers which thrive in shade, even deep shade. Japanese Spurge, *Pachysandra terminalis*, is probably the most widely used groundcover in shade for many good reasons. It tolerates deep shade and forms a dense evergreen mat six inches in height. *Hosta* also prefers shade to partial shade. There is a wide variation of leaf colors and sizes, and also in the mature height of this plant. Barren Strawberry, *Waldsteinia ternata*, is a very good groundcover for the shade. It has dark green, glossy foliage with bright yellow flowers in May. The mature height is about six inches and is evergreen in nature. Primrose, *Primula veris*, also has yellow flowers in May, and has attractive leathery, green leaves. This list is almost endless when it comes to shade-tolerant groundcovers.

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