

GROUND COVERS ADORN SURFACES IN SHADY, LOW MAINTENANCE AREAS

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Ground covers are a real alternative for turf in sun or shade to reduce maintenance. Many shade-loving ground covers grow especially well around trees while not competing heavily with the tree or shrub for moisture and nutrients. Further, these ground covers don't require mowing, thus mower damage to trees is eliminated. A few of the outstanding shade-tolerant ground covers include Lily-of-the-Valley (*Convallaria majalis*), English Ivy (*Hedera helix*), Plantain Lilly (*Hosta Species*), Japanese Spurge (*Pachysandra terminalis*), Primrose (*Primula species*), and Periwinkle (*Vinca minor*). All of these ground covers are less competitive than turf; therefore, shallow-rooted dense trees, e.g. maple, Horse Chestnut, and beech, thrive when planted as companions.

Lily-of-the-Valley (*Convallaria majalis*) is especially well suited to dense shade. The foliage is comprised of two large upright oval leaves, 8

inches long and 1 to 3 inches in width. When planted, this ground cover quickly masses in, being particularly effective during summer, from mid-May through early September. The fragrant flowers are waxy white and bell-like hanging off upright spikes. The spikes usually are as tall or slightly taller than the foliage. Flowering occurs from early May through mid-June, depending on how far north one tries planting these extremely hardy herbaceous perennials. To keep these plants vigorous and dense, one should consider fertilizing once every three to four years. Although Lily-of-the-Valley will survive in partial sun, it thrives in full shade. The soil should be moist, deep, and fertile. The above requirements and characteristics make Lily-of-the-Valley extremely effective during the growing season as companions for many of our dense trees, e.g. maple, beech, and redbud. The main drawback with this plant is that a foliar disease often affects the



Baltic ivy (*H. helix* 'Baltica'), an extremely hardy cover and a weak climber, grows in exposed areas and will remain ever-green throughout the harshest of winters. (Above)

Japanese Spurge (*Pachysandra terminalis*), one of the best ground covers for deep shade, complements this Redbud (*Cercis canadensis*) and shallow-rooted trees in the landscape. (Right)



leaves during mid to late summer, causing yellowing and dieback, reducing the effectiveness of the dark green leaves. After the first frost, the plants die down to soil level, leaving the ground somewhat bare throughout the entire winter, but during the growing season, this is one of the most dense ground covers.

English Ivy (*Hedera helix*) is perfectly hardy as far north as central Michigan. It thrives in dense shade, being somewhat evergreen when planted in protected areas, such as the north or northeast side of buildings. English Ivy prefers a moist-deep-rich fertile soil and, again, is a good companion for many of the dense, yet lowland species, such as Red Maple, beech, and hawthorn. If grown north of Columbus, Ohio, winter protection is often required to reduce dieback or burning. English Ivy is a particularly effective ground cover when planted with narcissus or minor spring bulbs. Baltic Ivy (*H. helix* 'Baltica') is an extremely hardy form which is a weak climber. One can use Baltic Ivy in exposed areas and it will remain evergreen throughout the harshest of winters.

Plantain Lily (*Hosta decora*) is an herbacious perennial which thrives in semi- and full shade areas. The leaves start growing in late spring and provide dense, rich light green ground cover, 6 to 8 inches in height, for the entire growing season. Plantain Lily thrives in areas with moist, fertile well-drained soil. Usually, it is most effective as individual clumps that colour together. Blue flowers are borne on spikes about 18 inches long, flowering during early summer above the foliage. These 2-inch long bell-shaped flowers are a good contrast to the foliage and can be a welcome addition for the summer months. There are many cultivars of *Hosta* which are variegated, increasing the variability of textures and color.

Hall's Honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica* 'Halliana') is an extremely vigorous ground cover which can effectively be used on hillsides or areas which are difficult to mow. It establishes rapidly but often escapes confinement; therefore, continuous pruning (restriction) is important if one does not want this aggressive ground cover to take over the entire landscape. It thrives in semi-shade or full sun areas. Hall's Honeysuckle roots readily in rich, well-drained fertile soil. It is not a good companion plant for small shrubs or trees as it is extremely vigorous and depletes the soil of moisture and nutrients. This aggressive characteristic can literally kill many of the small shrubs and trees. South of Detroit, Hall's Honeysuckle is semi-evergreen but is perfectly hardy north to Midland, Michigan. This ground cover should be used in mass plantings, e.g. as a substitute for turf on hillsides, with discretion.

Japanese Spurge (*Pachysandra terminalis*) is a perfectly hardy, lush evergreen ground cover,

reaching 6 to 10 inches in height with leaves 2 to 4 inches long. Flowering occurs during late April or early May. These white spikes are particularly effective as they are borne above the old foliage. By many, pachysandra is considered the most effective evergreen ground cover, but one must realize, it can be overused. It is an outstanding companion for shallow-rooted trees, such as magnolia, maple, beech, and Common Horsechestnut. It will do well in partial or dense shade. Pachysandra is particularly effective when narcissus are planted prior to its planting and allowed to grow up through. It thrives in deep-rich-fertile well-drained soil. Once established, pachysandra fills in rapidly.

Polyanthus Primrose (*Primula polyantha*) is another extremely effective ground cover which thrives in shady, moist areas. The leaves are tufted at the base, being a light green, somewhat feathery, dying back to the ground mid-summer, leaving bare ground for much of the growing season. Primrose break dormancy early in the spring, prior to tree bud break and, therefore, are extremely effective in woody or rock garden areas. The five-petal, light lobed flowers come in many different colors with pink and yellow being quite common. There are over 500 different species of primrose with the most commonly available ones including *Primula polyantha*, reaching 6 to 12 inches in height; Cowslip (*P. veris*), reaching 8 inches in height with deep yellow (very fragrant) flowers; and English Primrose (*P. vulgaris*), again, having sulphur-yellow flowers, 1½ inches across, being very effective from mid-April through June. Primrose are particularly effective for intimate areas near water (ponds or streams).

Periwinkle (*Vinca minor*) is an extremely aggressive evergreen ground cover which thrives in semi-shade. It does well in fertile well-drained soil. It has blue flowers during mid-May and has a rich evergreen foliage which survives even when subjected to the rigors of winter. Periwinkle can be planted in almost any location. It is not a good companion for shallow-rooted plants but is extremely effective in large areas when used in mass plantings or as a companion for some of the deeper-rooted trees, e.g. oak and pine. Its dark, rich green foliage, which reaches 8 to 10 inches in height, is neat and effective with few disease or insect problems. There are many varieties, with 'Bowles' being the most readily available in the trade. A drawback of 'Bowles' variety of periwinkle is it is somewhat tufted, not nearly as aggressive a grower as is the species form.

All of the aforementioned ground covers thrive in semi or full shade and prefer moist, rich fertile soil. They are outstanding as companion plants to reduce maintenance while improving the micro climate, thus helping many trees thrive.

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