

Ground covers beat weeds, prevent soil erosion

■ Ground covers tend to be lower-growing, usually evergreen plants used in place of grass, mulching materials or stone, to beautify areas inhospitable to turf. As a living mulch, they prevent mechanical damage to trees and shrubs.

Ground covers can be used under trees where low branches prevent mowing, or to hide exposed tree roots.

Ground covers can trail close to the ground or grow as high as three feet tall. The Garden Council reports a wide variety of ground covers which prevent weed growth and soil erosion while decorating large garden areas.

The best ground covers are free of insect and disease problems; semi-evergreen to fully evergreen; widely adaptable; easily propagated, and vigorous.

Of course, the most commonly used ground cover is grass, but there are many others which come complete with flowers, berries, textures and colors.

Some ground covers flourish in shady areas, rocky slopes or hot, arid spots. When they're done blooming, they decompose to provide a permanent mulch which encourages further growth.

How to choose—The choice of ground cover depends on a variety of site-related factors:

- the design characteristics you seek, such as color, texture, form, shape, size, growth habit and rate of growth;
- the site—sun or shade, wet or dry, acid or alkaline, salt exposure and wind flow;
- how will they function in the landscape—as a transition zone or as area of visual interest;
- the hardiness and adaptability of the plant to the area;
- maintenance needs of the plant and the ability to care for it as needed;
- availability.

Sources: Russell Balge, Free State Nursery News; The Garden Council



Periwinkle, *Vinca Minor*

Ground covers for shade

winter creeper (*Euonymus fortunei* & cvs.)
English ivy (*Hedera helix* & cvs.)
creeping lily turf (*Liriope spicata*)
periwinkle (*Vinca minor*)

Ground covers for sun

winter creeper (*Euonymus fortunei* & cvs.)
edging candytuft (*Iberis sempervirens*)
three-toothed cinquefoil (*Potentilla tridentata*)

Ground covers for acid soils

European wild ginger (*Asarum europaeum*)
heather (*Calluna* spp.)
lily-of-the-valley (*Convallaria majalis*)
barrenwort (*Epimedium* spp.)
wintercreeper (*Euonymus fortunei* cvs.)
sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*)
wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*)
English ivy (*Hedera helix*)
hosta (*Hosta* spp. & cvs.)
edging candytuft (*Iberis sempervirens*)
partridgeberry (*Mitchella repens*)
Japanese spurge (*Pachysandra terminalis*)
canby pachistima (*Paxistima canbyi*)

Ground covers for moist soils

bugleweed (*Ajuga* spp. & cvs.)
European wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*)
heather (*Calluna vulgaris*)

Advantages of ground covers

- can be used on steep slopes or rocky areas where mowing is not possible
- usually do not require much maintenance
- will function as living mulch
- assist and enhance soil structure by virtue of their greater root penetration that turf grasses; this improves soil aeration and water percolation;
- they may enrich the soil by adding organic matter to the soil;
- generally more resistant to insects and diseases.

Disadvantages

- must usually be transplanted from vegetative starts;
- can not usually be weeded with selective herbicides; the exception is the elimination of grassy weeds in broadleaved ground covers with Fusilade (*fluazifop-P-butyl*) or Poast (*sethoxydim*);
- usually more susceptible to damage by pedestrians;
- the tender varieties are sometimes killed by harsh winters;
- they can sometimes be smothered by leaves;
- they may have to be treated for a wider range of insects and diseases than lawns;
- until well established, they may be difficult to keep free of weeds for 2-4 years.