



# GROUND COVERS FOR THE CHICAGO AREA

A ground cover plant is any low-growing or trailing plant used in the landscape to cover exposed areas of soil. A wide variety of plants may be used as groundcover, including perennial herbaceous plants, deciduous and or evergreen woody plants, and vary in height from 1 inch to 3-4 feet. This fact sheet focuses on herbaceous ground covers. Please refer to *Woody Ground Covers for the Chicago Area* for information on non-herbaceous ground covers.

At one time, turf grass was the most common ground cover, but many gardeners now find lower maintenance plants more desirable. There are several different reasons for choosing other plants over turf grasses. Many ground covers require less maintenance than turf. This is especially important when dealing with small areas, corners or edges of the yard where mowing is difficult. Ground cover plants help suppress weeds in garden beds and under trees and shrubs. Herbaceous ground covers are often chosen for aesthetic reasons. Ornamental foliage, flowers, fruit, leaf texture and growth habits are particularly attractive during the growing season and may provide good winter interest. Ground covers can tie many different elements of a landscape together. Herbaceous ground covers are often planted in areas not suitable for turf grass, such as dense shade, steep slopes, and poor soil.

Ground cover plants are a valuable addition to the landscape. However, they may require a considerable amount of time to become established and can sometimes be costly. To insure success of the first planting, the site must be properly prepared, planted, and maintained correctly.

## Site Preparation

A properly prepared planting bed will provide a suitable environment for good root development and will reduce future maintenance needs.

1: String, wooden stakes, a garden hose, chalk, or spray paint may be used to clearly mark garden bed outlines prior to digging. This is especially useful if the bed edges are curved.

2: Remove any unwanted vegetation. Strip the sod with a flat-edge spade or sod cutter and dig out roots from previously planted vegetation, especially perennial weeds. If the area is large, the use of herbicides may be necessary. Please call Plant Information Service at (847) 835-0972 for chemical treatment

recommendations. When using chemicals, follow all label directions carefully.

3: Evaluate the soil. Determine whether the soil is suitable for root growth or if it must be improved. In the Chicago area most garden soils are heavy clay and are slow to drain. This problem can be corrected with the addition of proper soil amendments. If using plants that have pH preferences, a soil test should be taken to check the fertility and pH level of the soil prior to planting. Refer to the *Garden Soils Fact Sheet* for specific guidelines regarding soil amendments and testing.

4: Add soil amendments, if necessary. Be careful when adding amendments beneath established trees and shrubs. No more than 2-3 inches should be added at any time to avoid compacting the soil which will decrease the soil's oxygen level and suffocate plant roots. Take care when tilling areas beneath established trees and shrubs so as not to disturb plant roots.

5: Rake the bed area until it is smooth. Remove any large soil clumps and rocks.

6: If possible, do not plant the bed for approximately one to two weeks. During this time the soil will settle and weed seeds will germinate. They can be easily removed before planting.

## Planting

Ground cover plants are planted in the same way as other garden plants. Plants can be installed in spring or fall; however, it is best to plant them early in the spring so they will have an entire growing season to become established. Make sure they receive adequate moisture upon planting and during hot, dry periods. If rainfall is insufficient, supplemental water will be necessary.

Spacing is an important consideration when planting ground covers. Planting distances depend on several factors including the plant's habit, growth rate, cost, and how quickly the area must be filled in. As a general rule, the plants should be spaced approximately half the mature width of the plant apart. Growers' recommended spacing distances are usually found on the plant labels.

Ground cover plants fill in more quickly if they are planted in a diamond or staggered pattern. This arrangement is more aesthetically pleasing and will provide better erosion control than ground covers planted in rows.

When woody ground covers are planted specifically for erosion control on banks or slopes, plants should be spaced closer than they would be on level ground in order to provide more immediate coverage. Staggered planting is helpful in minimizing the amount of erosion that might occur before the slope is totally covered.

## Maintenance

Another component of a successful ground cover planting is proper maintenance. To minimize loss, plants must develop a strong, healthy root system during the first growing season. Mulching, regular weeding, and supplemental watering will enhance the root growth and survival rate of the plants.

## Sunlight Key:

FS = Full sun

PS = Part shade

Sh = Shade

## Common Yarrow

### *Achillea millefolium*

Bloom color: white; cultivars in shades of red and pink  
Bloom season: mid-late summer  
Size: 12-36" in bloom  
Requirements: FS, well-drained soil  
Landscape use: cutting garden, mass plantings  
Zone: 4-8  
Note: fast growing; tolerates hot, dry sites & infertile soil  
Cultivars: 'Little Susie', 'Pretty Woman', 'Lilac Beauty', 'Oertel's Rose'

## Woolly Yarrow

### *Achillea tomentosa*

Bloom color: bright yellow  
Bloom season: summer  
Size: 6-12" h x 18" w  
Requirements: FS, well-drained soil  
Landscape use: rock gardens, along stone walls  
Zone: 3-7  
Note: tolerates hot, dry sites & infertile soil; mat-forming; fast growing  
Cultivar: 'Maynard's Gold'

## Bugleweed

### *Ajuga reptans*

Bloom color: bluish-purple  
Bloom season: early to late spring-early summer  
Size: 4-9" in flower  
Requirements: PS-Sh, tolerates poor soil  
Landscape use: embankments, under shade trees, between stepping stones  
Zone: 4-8  
Note: Forms dense mats. Occasionally remains evergreen during winter. May be aggressive.  
Cultivars: 'Alba', 'Burgundy Glow', 'Bronze Beauty'

A flourishing ground cover planting depends not only on proper cultural practices but also on careful selection of plant material. Plants should not be selected on aesthetic value alone. Selecting the right plant for the proper location is the first and most important step in growing a successful ground cover bed.

The following is a list of herbaceous ground cover plants that are recommended for the Chicago area. Cultivars listed are just a few of many good varieties that are available on the market and that will grow well in our area. Please contact Plant Information Service at (847) 835-0972 or [plantinfo@chicagobotanic.org](mailto:plantinfo@chicagobotanic.org) for more information.

## Lady's Mantle

### *Alchemilla vulgaris*

Bloom color: greenish-yellow  
Bloom season: late spring-early summer.  
Size: 18" h in flower x 24" w  
Requirements: PS, well-drained soil  
Landscape use: borders  
Zone: 4-7

## Rock Cress

### *Arabis caucasica* (*A. albida*)

Bloom color: white, fragrant  
Bloom season: early spring  
Size: 12" h x 18" w  
Requirements: FS-PS, well-drained soil  
Landscape use: rock gardens, stone walls, borders  
Zone: 4-7  
Note: Prune back after flowering to promote compact habit. Plant in a cool location, if possible.  
Cultivar: 'Snowcap'

## Mountain Sandwort

### *Arenaria montana*

Bloom color: white  
Bloom season: mid-late spring  
Size: 6-8" h  
Requirements: PS-FS, moist, well-drained soil  
Landscape use: rock gardens, borders  
Zone: 4-7

## Canadian Wild Ginger

### *Asarum canadense*

Bloom color: brownish-purple  
Bloom season: mid-late spring  
Size: 6-12" h, spreading  
Requirements: shade, moist soil high in organic matter. Prefers pH level of 5.5-6.5.  
Landscape use: mass plantings, borders  
Zone: 4-8  
Note: Can be evergreen. Somewhat harder than European Ginger

## European Wild Ginger

### *Asarum europaeum*

Bloom color: brownish-purple flowers  
Bloom season: mid-late spring  
Size: 6-10" h, spreading  
Requirements: shade, moist soil high in organic matter, protection from winter sun & wind. Prefers pH level of 5.5-6.5.  
Landscape use: borders, beds  
Zone: 4-7  
Note: may be evergreen

## Dwarf Chinese Astilbe

### *Astilbe chinensis* 'Pumila'

Bloom color: deep pink flowers  
Bloom season: mid-late summer  
Size: 12-16" h in flower x 8-12" w  
Requirements: PS, moist, well-drained soil  
Landscape use: edging, borders  
Zone: 4-8  
Note: will tolerate dry soil

## Siberian Bugloss

### *Brunnera macrophylla*

Bloom color: blue flowers  
Bloom season: early-late spring  
Size: 12-18" h in flower x 18" w  
Requirements: PS, moist, well-drained soil  
Landscape use: borders  
Zone: 3-8  
Note: freely self-seeds  
Cultivars: 'Emerald Mist', 'Jack Frost', 'Hadspen Cream', 'Looking Glass'

## Serbian Bellflower

### *Campanula poscharskyana*

Bloom color: Lavender-blue  
Bloom season: late spring-early summer  
Size: 8-12" h x 12" w  
Requirements: FS-Sh, well-drained soil  
Landscape use: borders, stone walls, rock gardens  
Zone: 3-8  
Note: tolerates poor soil, drought tolerant when established  
Cultivars: 'Blue Waterfall', 'E.H. Frost'

## Snow-in-Summer

### *Cerastium tomentosum*

Bloom color: white flowers  
Bloom season: mid to late spring-early summer  
Size: 3-6" h x 12" w  
Requirements: FS, well-drained soil  
Landscape use: slopes, rocky areas, rock gardens, between paving stones  
Zone: 3-7  
Note: cut back after blooming to promote compactness

## Plumbago

### *Ceratostigma plumbaginoides*

Bloom color: dark blue  
Bloom season: summer-fall  
Size: 8-12" h x 18" w  
Requirements: PS-FS, well drained soil  
Landscape use: rock gardens, perennial beds, substitute for turf under trees  
Zone: 5-9  
Note: Foliage may turn reddish in fall.

## Lily of the Valley

### *Convallaria majalis*

Bloom color: white, fragrant  
Bloom season: mid-spring  
Size: 6-12" h  
Requirements: PS-Sh  
Landscape use: slopes  
Zone: 2-7  
Note: may be aggressive  
Cultivars: 'Albostrata', 'Rosea'

## Bishop's Cap

### *Epimedium grandiflorum*

Bloom color: pink  
Bloom season: spring  
Size: 12" h x 12" w  
Requirements: PS-Sh, moist soil  
Landscape use: planting beds under trees, rock gardens, borders  
Zone: 5-8  
Note: bronze fall color, may remain evergreen during winter  
Cultivars: 'Lilafee', 'Rubinkrone'

## Red Barrenwort

### *Epimedium x rubrum*

Bloom color: crimson  
Bloom season: spring  
Size: 8-12" h x 12" w  
Requirements: PS-Sh, moist soil  
Landscape use: planting beds under trees, rock gardens, borders  
Zone: 4-8  
Note: foliage is reddish in spring

## Sweet Woodruff

### *Galium odoratum*

Bloom color: white, fragrant  
Bloom season: late spring-early summer  
Size: 6-8" h  
Requirements: PS-Sh, moist, well-drained  
Landscape use: rock garden, edging, borders,  
planting beds under trees  
Zone: 4-8  
Note: foliage may die back in  
summer if allowed to get  
too dry.

## Cranesbill

### *Geranium spp.*

Bloom color: pink  
Bloom season: summer  
Size: 6-30" h  
Requirements: FS-PS  
Landscape use: beds, borders  
Zone: 4-8  
Cultivars: 'Biokovo', 'Brookside',  
'Cambridge',  
'Ingwersen's Variety'

## Creeping Baby's Breath

### *Gypsophila repens*

Bloom color: lilac, pale purple, pink or white  
Bloom season: early-mid summer  
Size: 6-10" h  
Requirements: shade, moist, well-drained soil  
Landscape use: edging, rock gardens, mixed  
borders, stone walls  
Zone: 4-8  
Cultivars: 'Alba', 'Rosea'

## Daylily

### *Hemerocallis spp.*

Bloom color: wide variety of colors  
Bloom season: summer-late fall,  
depending upon variety  
Size: 12-48" h  
Requirements: FS-PS, well-drained soil  
Landscape use: mass plantings, erosion control  
rock gardens, borders  
Zone: 3-9  
Note: easy to grow  
Cultivars: 'Countless Carrots', 'Chicago  
Heirloom', 'Fringed Porcelain',  
'Lavender Frolic',  
'Nashville Star'

## Hosta or Funkia

### *Hosta spp.*

Bloom color: white, lavender, lilac  
Bloom season: mid-late summer  
Size: 8-48" h  
Requirements: PS-Sh, well-drained soil  
Landscape use: borders, rock gardens,  
massed plantings,  
naturalized areas, edging  
Zone: 3-8  
Cultivars: 'Big Daddy', 'Fragrant Bouquet',  
'Guacamole', 'Krossa Regal',  
'Paul's Glory', 'Sum & Substance',  
'Gold Standard', 'Frances Williams'

## Sedum or Stonecrop

### *Hylotelephium kamtschaticum*

Bloom color: yellow  
Bloom season: summer  
Size: 4" h (9" in bloom) x 15-18" w  
Requirements: FS, well-drained soil  
Landscape use: stone walls, hillsides, borders, banks  
Zone: 3-8  
Note: fast growing  
Cultivars: 'Variegatum',  
'Weihenstephaner Gold'

## Sedum or Two Row Stonecrop

### *Hylotelephium spurium*

Bloom color: pinkish-red  
Bloom season: summer  
Size: 2-6" h x 18" w  
Requirements: FS, well-drained soil  
Landscape use: rock gardens, stone walls  
Zone: 3-8  
Note: fast growing  
Cultivars: 'Dragon's Blood', 'Elizabeth'

## Variiegated Yellow Archangel

### *Lamiastrum galeobdolon* 'Variegatum'

Bloom color: yellow  
Bloom season: summer  
Size: 12-18" h x 18-24" w  
Requirements: PS-Sh, well-drained soil  
Landscape use: beds, woodlands, slopes  
Zone: 4-9  
Note: may be aggressive

## Spotted Dead Nettle

### *Lamium maculatum*

Bloom color: pink or white  
Bloom season: late spring-summer  
Size: 8-12" h  
Requirements: PS-Sh, moist well-drained soil  
Landscape use: beds, slopes, borders  
Zone: 3-8  
Note: may be aggressive  
Cultivars: 'Beacon Silver', 'Chequers',  
'Shell Pink', 'White Nancy'

## Creeping Lilyturf

### *Liriope spicata*

Bloom color: pale violet to white  
Bloom season: mid-late summer  
Size: 8-12"  
Requirements: FS-PS-Sh, moist, fertile soil  
Landscape use: edging, beds, borders  
Zone: 4-10  
Cultivar: 'Franklin Mint'

## Catmint

### *Nepeta x faassenii*

Bloom color: violet-blue flowers  
Bloom season: late spring-early summer  
Size: 18-36" h x 36-48" w  
Requirements: FS, well-drained soil  
Landscape use: dry, poor soils, edging, borders, rock gardens  
Zone: 3-8  
Note: Cut back after flowering to encourage re-bloom and to control shape. Pest-free, tolerates heat & drought.  
Cultivars: 'Kit Cat', 'Superba'

## Allegheny Spurge

### *Pachysandra procumbens*

Bloom color: white with pink tinge  
Bloom season: early-late spring  
Size: 8-12" h  
Requirements: PS-Sh, moist, well-drained soil  
Landscape use: planting beds under mature trees  
Zone: 5-9  
Note: evergreen  
Cultivar: 'Forest Green'

## Japanese Spurge

### *Pachysandra terminalis*

Bloom color: white  
Bloom season: early spring  
Size: 8-12" h  
Requirements: PS-Sh, moist, well-drained soil  
Landscape use: planting beds under mature trees  
Zone: 4-9  
Note: evergreen  
Cultivars: 'Green Carpet', 'Silver Edge'

## Creeping Phlox

### *Phlox subulata*

Bloom color: pink, violet, or white flowers  
Bloom season: mid-late spring  
Size: 3-6" h x 24" w  
Requirements: FS

Landscape use: rock gardens, slopes, stone walls  
Zone: 3-8  
Cultivars: 'Candy Stripe', 'Emerald Blue', 'Emerald Pink', 'White Delight'

## Lamb's Ears

### *Stachys byzantina*

Bloom color: purplish-pink (some cultivars are non-flowering)  
Bloom season: summer  
Size: 12-15" h x 18" w  
Requirements: FS, well-drained soil  
Landscape use: borders  
Zone: 4-8  
Note: often grown for foliage, not flowers  
Cultivars: 'Big Ears', 'Silver Carpet'

## Mother-of-Thyme

### *Thymus serpyllum*

Bloom color: purple-lilac  
Bloom season: late spring  
Size: 3-6" h  
Requirements: FS, well-drained soil  
Landscape use: rock walls, between flagstone  
Zone: 3-8  
Note: thrives in poor, dry soil  
Cultivars: 'Coccineus', 'Pink Chintz', 'Wild Garden Lavender'

## Rock Speedwell

### *Veronica prostrata*

Bloom color: blue  
Bloom season: late spring-early summer  
Size: 8" h in flower  
Requirements: FS-PS  
Landscape use: between paving stones  
Zone: 4-8  
Note: cut spent blooms to encourage re-bloom  
Cultivars: 'Aztec Gold', 'Tidal Pool'

## Siberian Barren Strawberry

### *Waldsteinia ternata*

Bloom color: yellow  
Bloom season: late spring-early summer  
Size: 3-6" h x 6-12" w  
Requirements: FS-PS  
Landscape use: edging, plants beds under mature trees & shrubs  
Zone: 4-8  
Note: no edible fruits produced



CHICAGO BOTANIC GARDEN

1000 lake cook road glencoe, illinois 60022

www.chicagobotanic.org (847) 835-5440

One of the treasures of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County