



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 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: 'Albostriata', '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'

Variegated 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

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