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.

Please contact Plant Information Service at (847) 835-0972 or plantinfo@chicagobotanic.org for more information.
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 hardier 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:** May be evergreen

### 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,’ ‘Ingversen’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  

**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, hill sides, 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’
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plant Name</th>
<th>Scientific Name</th>
<th>Bloom Color</th>
<th>Bloom Season</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Requirements</th>
<th>Landscape Use</th>
<th>Zone</th>
<th>Cultivars</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creeping Lilyturf</td>
<td>Liriope spicata</td>
<td>pale violet to white</td>
<td>mid-late summer</td>
<td>8-12”</td>
<td>FS-PS-Sh, moist, fertile soil</td>
<td>edging, beds, borders</td>
<td>4-10</td>
<td>‘Franklin Mint’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Catmint</td>
<td>Nepeta x faassenii</td>
<td>violet-blue flowers</td>
<td>late spring-early summer</td>
<td>18-36” h x 36-48” w</td>
<td>FS, well-drained soil</td>
<td>dry, poor soils, edging, borders</td>
<td>3-8</td>
<td>‘Kit Cat’, ‘Superba’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Allegheny Spurge</td>
<td>Pachysandra procumbens</td>
<td>white with pink tinge</td>
<td>early-late spring</td>
<td>8-12” h</td>
<td>PS-Sh, moist, well-drained soil</td>
<td>planting beds under mature trees</td>
<td>5-9</td>
<td>‘Forest Green’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Japanese Spurge</td>
<td>Pachysandra terminalis</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>early spring</td>
<td>8-12” h</td>
<td>PS-Sh, moist, well-drained soil</td>
<td>planting beds under mature trees</td>
<td>4-9</td>
<td>‘Green Carpet’, ‘Silver Edge’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creeping Phlox</td>
<td>Phlox subulata</td>
<td>pink, violet, or white flowers</td>
<td>mid-late spring</td>
<td>3-6” h x 24” w</td>
<td>FS</td>
<td></td>
<td>4-8</td>
<td>no edible fruits produced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamb’s Ears</td>
<td>Stachys byzantina</td>
<td>purplish-pink</td>
<td>late spring-early summer</td>
<td>12-15” h x 18” w</td>
<td>FS, well-drained soil</td>
<td>borders</td>
<td>4-8</td>
<td>‘Big Ears’, ‘Silver Carpet’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother-of-Thyme</td>
<td>Thymus serphyllum</td>
<td>purple-lilac</td>
<td>late spring</td>
<td>3-6” h</td>
<td>FS, well-drained soil</td>
<td>rock walls, between flagstone</td>
<td>3-8</td>
<td>‘Coccineus’, ‘Pink Chintz’, ‘Wild Garden Lavender’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rock Speedwell</td>
<td>Veronica prostrata</td>
<td>blue</td>
<td>late spring-early summer</td>
<td>8” h in flower</td>
<td>FS-PS</td>
<td>between paving stones</td>
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<tr>
<td>Siberian Barren Strawberry</td>
<td>Waldsteinia ternata</td>
<td>yellow</td>
<td>late spring-early summer</td>
<td>3-6” h x 6-12” w</td>
<td>FS-PS</td>
<td>edging, plants beds under mature trees &amp; shrubs</td>
<td>4-8</td>
<td>no edible fruits produced</td>
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