



WOODY 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. They vary in height from 4 to 48 inches. Please refer to *Ground Covers for the Chicago Area* for information on herbaceous ground covers.

Woody ground covers have attributes that may make them more desirable than herbaceous ground covers. Some woody ground covers require less maintenance than other ground covers because they don't require deadheading or regular maintenance, except for occasional pruning. Woody ground covers may be incorporated into the landscape for aesthetic reasons. Many have ornamental foliage, flowers, fruit, or growth habits during the growing season and they provide good winter interest. Ground covers can tie many different elements of a landscape together. Woody plants also provide year-round vegetation on slopes and banks that may require erosion control.

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 ensure 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 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 that 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. Established woody plants should receive approximately one inch of water per week throughout the growing season. 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

Bearberry

Arctostaphylos uva-uris

Bloom color: white tinged with pink
Bloom season: spring
Fruit: red
Size: 6-12" h x 24-48" w
Requirements: FS-PS, well-drained, infertile, acidic soil
Landscape use: sandy soil
Zone: 2-6
Note: reddish foliage in fall, forms thick mats, salt-tolerant

Sweet Fern

Comptonia peregrina

Bloom color: yellow-green, not showy
Bloom season: spring
Size: 22-48" h x 48-96" w
Requirements: FS-PS, poor, infertile, acidic soil
Landscape use: slopes, naturalized areas
Zone: 2-5(6)
Note: aromatic, colorful stems

Cranberry Cotoneaster

Cotoneaster apiculatus

Bloom color: pink
Bloom season: late spring-early summer
Fruit: cranberry red
Size: 22-36" h x 36-72" w
Requirements: FS-PS, well-drained soil
Landscape use: banks, slopes, groups, trailing stone walls or steps
Zone: 4-7

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 woody ground cover plants 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.

Hess Cotoneaster

Cotoneaster horizontalis 'Hessei'

Bloom color: pink
Bloom season: late spring-early summer
Fruit: red
Size: 24-36" h x 60" w
Growth rate: slow-medium
Requirements: FS-PS, well-drained soil
Landscape use: banks, slopes, groups, trailing stone walls/steps
Zone: 5-7

Purpleleaf Wintercreeper

Euonymus fortunei var. *coloratus*

Size: 4-12", to 70' if grown as a vine
Requirements: FS-Sh, well-drained soil
Landscape use: groundcover or vine
Zone: 4-8
Note: foliage turns purple during winter

Common Woadwaxen or Greenwood

Genista tinctoria

Bloom color: yellow
Bloom season: summer
Size: 24-36" h x 24-36" w
Requirements: FS, dry, infertile, well-drained soil
Landscape use: poor, dry soil
Zone: 4-7

English Ivy
Hedera helix

Size: 6-8", trails to 90"
Requirements: PS-Sh, moist, fertile, well-drained soil
Landscape use: groundcover or vine
Zone: 4-9
Note: vining, evergreen, good in heavy shade
Cultivar: 'Thorndale'

St. Johnswort
Hypericum 'Hidcote'

Bloom color: yellow
Bloom season: summer
Size: 36" x 24" w
Requirements: FS-PS, well-drained soil
Landscape use: beds, borders
Zone: 5-9
Note: drought tolerant

Candytuft
Iberis sempervirens

Bloom color: white
Bloom season: spring
Size: 6-12" h x 24" w
Requirements: FS, well-drained soil
Landscape use: rock gardens, borders
Zone: 3-9
Note: evergreen foliage

Creeping Juniper
Juniperus horizontalis

Size: 12-24" h x 48-96" w
Requirements: FS, well-drained soil
Landscape use: slopes, mass plantings
Zone: 4-9
Note: silver-blue evergreen foliage, purple-tinged foliage in winter, salt tolerant
Cultivars: 'Mother Lode', 'Wiltonii'

Japanese Garden Juniper
Juniperus procumbens 'Nana'

Size: 8-12" h x 180" w
Requirements: FS, well-drained soil
Landscape use: mass plantings, groups, garden beds, borders
Zone: 4-7
Note: evergreen

Blue Star Juniper
Juniperus squamata 'Blue Star'

Size: 36" h x 36-48" w
Requirements: FS, well-drained soil
Landscape use: foundations, mass plantings
Zone: 4-7
Note: blue-green evergreen foliage, purple-tinged foliage in winter, salt tolerant

Gro-low Fragrant Sumac

Rhus aromatica 'Grow Low'

Bloom color: yellow, inconspicuous
Bloom season: spring
Fruit: red (female plants only)
Fall Color: orange-red
Size: 24" h x 72" w
Requirements: FS-PS, well-drained soil
Landscape use: slopes, mass plantings, groups, bank stabilization, garden beds
Zone: 3-9

Cutleaf Stephanandra
Stephanandra incisa 'Crispa'

Size: 12-36" h x 36" w
Requirements: FS-PS, moist, well-drained soil
Landscape use: mass plantings, retaining walls
Zone: 4-7



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