



# Trowel Talk!

April, 2015

## The ground rules on groundcovers

Ever thought of using groundcovers to replace poorly growing grass, to plant near cedar hedges and under trees, or to prevent erosion on slopes? Nurseries usually have separate sections devoted to groundcovers and there are many reasons for considering these versatile plants.

Ground covers display varying textures, shapes and colours of leaf and blossom. Most are drought tolerant, so they don't need watering except during dry spells. Some, like wintergreen, bearberry and dianthus keep their green foliage through winter. They are a refreshing sight each spring. Groundcovers like yarrow, creeping jenny, and certain sedums withstand light foot traffic. Others, such as Irish moss and creeping thyme can actually be walked on, once established.



Photo: Mary Ann Van Berlo

Creeping thyme loves hot dry conditions and does well in this pool-side garden.

### Trowel Talk!

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The term "groundcover" refers to spreading perennial plants that may grow close to the ground or to a height of 60 to 90cm. Your choices will depend on the site you are working on.

Ajuga, lily-of-the valley and Japanese spurge all prefer partial shade. The last two are my shady-site favourites – one for its scent and one for its great vigour. They do well near hedges and under trees.



Photo: Mary Ann Van Berlo

**Pachysandra (or Japanese spurge) tolerates shady conditions.**

Although Japanese spurge is slow to get established, it is worth the wait. It does its own weed control as do most groundcovers because they are just as hardy and vigorous, or more so, than most weeds.

Some groundcovers may even become weeds themselves. A common one is goutweed. It propagates both by seed and by underground stems. If you insist on having aggressive plants such as this, they must be contained by a walkway or some other in-ground barrier that should be installed at least 30cm. deep. I like its green and white variegated foliage, so I grow it on the mostly shaded, north side of my house and control it.

Other groundcovers that can become invasive are creeping jenny, lily-of-the-valley and ribbon grass.

These plants are easy to grow and can be dug out of the ground with little effort but even the smallest amount of root left in the ground may sprout a new plant.



Photo: Mary Ann Van Berlo

**A variety of groundcovers and patio stones in a checker-board pattern.**

Groundcovers that thrive in the sun include woolly lamb's ear, sedum, campanula, cranesbill, and creeping phlox. On my sunny sites I am especially fond of lamb's ear and yellow flowered sedum, one for the texture of its leaves and the other for its truly ground hugging habit.

My all-time favourites are the many types of sedums. They are drought, disease and insect resistant. All produce long lasting flowers, transplant easily in spring and fall, and spread quickly in sunny areas.

There is an ongoing trend developing that sees groundcovers being planted along highways and in parks where traditional grasses are not easy to grow as well as on slopes to prevent erosion. These low growing plants help to reduce maintenance costs.

Browse through a book or two on groundcovers and you will find out for yourself which plants fit your location, style and budget. You can cover a lot of ground right in your armchair!

Bob Duff  
Retired Master Gardener



## Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton

### Where to find us this month for free gardening advice!

#### ONGOING:

**Telephone Help Line:** 613-236-0034

- Wednesday and Thursday 1-3 pm (all year)

**E-mail Help Line:** [m goc\\_helpline@yahoo.ca](mailto:m goc_helpline@yahoo.ca)

- monitored daily

- send photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for ID

#### CLINICS:

**Rare & Unusual Plant Sale:** Sunday, May 10 (9 am – 1 pm)

Parking lot beside the Neatby Building, Carling at Maple Drive, Central Experimental Farm <http://www.friendsofthefarm.ca/events.htm>

**Red Trillium Studio & Garden Tour,** May 10-11 (10 am – 5 pm)

MGOC advice clinic at 112 Terraview Drive, Kinburn.

**Byward Market:** Saturdays, May 9-30 (10 am – 2 pm) and June 6-20 (9 am – 1 pm)

**Byward Market:** Sunday, May 10 (10 am – 2 pm)

**Parkdale Market:** Saturdays, May 9 – June 20 (9 am – 1 pm)

**Carp Market:** Saturdays, May 9 through June (9 am – 1 pm)

#### SPEAKING EVENTS & WORKSHOPS:

##### FRIENDS OF THE FARM LECTURE SERIES:

Individual Lectures: FCEF members \$12, non-members \$15

Building 72, Arboretum, Central Experimental Farm, Ottawa

Register at: 613-230-3276 or by e-mail [info@friendsofthefarm.ca](mailto:info@friendsofthefarm.ca)

**Three mini-lectures in one evening – April 21 – 7:00 pm**

Earthy Delights – Edythe Falconer, Master Gardener

Keeping the Garden Going Strong – Josie Pazdzior, Master Gardener

Trees and Shrubs for the Urban Garden – Laura Henderson, Master Gardener

**Rejuvenating a Tired Garden – May 5 – 7:00 pm**

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener

**Plant for Continuous Garden Joy – May 19 – 7:00 pm**

Judith Cox, Master Gardener

**The Beauty of Annuals – April 16 – 7:30pm**

Diane McClymont Peace, Master Gardener

CityView United Church, 6 Epworth Ave., Nepean

Hosted by the Nepean Horticultural Society (Guest fee: \$4)

**Making Scents of your Garden – April 20 – 7:30 pm**

Judith Cox, Master Gardener

4373 Generation Court, Ottawa

Hosted by the Gloucester Horticultural Society (No guest fee)

**From Zero to Garden in Under 2 Years – April 27 – 10:00 am**

Mary Ann Van Berlo, Master Gardener

Brockville Country Club, 1548 King Street West, Brockville

Hosted by the Brockville Probus Club (Guest fee: \$2 – register at:

[jwhytock@cogeco.ca](mailto:jwhytock@cogeco.ca))

**Gardens of Cuba – April 30 – 7:30 pm**

Mary Ann Van Berlo, Master Gardener

Rockcliffe Park Community Centre, 380 Springfield Road, Ottawa

Hosted by Rockcliffe Garden Club (Guest fee: \$7)

**Amazing 'Must-Have' Annuals – May 6 – 7:00 pm**

Mary Ann Van Berlo, Master Gardener

Greely Community Centre, 1448 Meadow Drive, Greely

Hosted by Greely Gardeners Club, (Guest fee: \$2)

### April TO DO List

- Start crops of cucumber, melons and squash indoors now.
- Grow lights should be just under 5cm above the plants, so ensure the lights can be adjusted up as the plants grow.
- Remove winter protection from plants on an overcast day so they don't get sun-scorch.
- Don't walk on saturated lawns or garden beds to avoid compacting the soil.
- When the overnight temperatures stop dipping below zero, you can start to harden off plants that you want to bring outside for the summer. Hardening off is the process of slowly acclimatizing your plants to outdoor conditions. Each day, increase the amount of exposure to sun and wind until the plants are able to stay out all day.
- If you have a gardening or plant identification question, ask a Master Gardener (contact information to the right).

### Tip of the Month

Spring is a good time to prune shrubs and trees. Pruning is done for a number of reasons – aesthetics, plant health and safety (to both people and property).

A general guideline for pruning shrubs is to prune summer and fall bloomers in the spring (examples would include *Hydrangea*, some *Spirea*, rose of Sharon, *Clethra*). Spring bloomers should be pruned after they bloom (for example: *For-sythia*, lilacs, *Rhododendrons*).

The logic behind this is that spring blooming shrubs have formed their flower buds in the fall and, if pruned in spring, this year's flowers would be lost. Shrubs that bloom in summer or fall form their flower buds in the spring so an early spring pruning is best for them.

Winter pruning is best for a number of genera of trees, since the tree is dormant so it is less stressful on the tree and because you have a clear view of the branch structure.

Fruit trees are a good example of trees that can be pruned when dormant.



Apple trees were winter pruned in this orchard. The pruned branches will be cleaned up once the ground dries out sufficiently.

However, some trees and shrubs will 'bleed' (or ooze sap) if cut at the wrong time of year. This can weaken the tree as it depletes its food supply. Avoid winter or spring pruning of maple, walnut, elm, birch and dogwood.

A couple of tips before you start: Make sure your pruning tools are clean and sharp. Clean tools won't harbour bacteria that could infect the open wound as you cut. A sharp tool will make a clean, precise cut that will heal quickly and be better able to resist infection.

As stated earlier, there are better times of year for pruning specific plants. Aesthetic pruning, and to some degree plant health pruning, should be scheduled based on whether the tree is likely to bleed.

Safety pruning can be done at any time of the year. Consider the 5 D's of pruning (dead, diseased, damaged, deformed and dangerous) when determining if pruning should be done immediately.

A shrub that blocks a pathway can be a tripping hazard. The dead limb in a mature tree can break under the weight of snow or heavy winds and crash onto your house or may even injure someone. For these reasons, it is far more important to do safety pruning when needed instead of waiting for a time when the shrub or tree won't bleed.

When taking out diseased wood on a tree, it is important to disinfect your tools between cuts so that you

## Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton



### Continued ...

**The Tormented Gardener** – May 11 – 7:00 pm

Diane McClymont Peace, Master Gardener

Ottawa South Community Centre (Old Firehall), 260 Sunnyside Ave., Ottawa

Hosted by the Old Ottawa South Garden Club (Guest fee: \$7)

**Making Daylily Bables in the Backyard** – May 12 – 7:00 pm

Kelly Noel, Master Gardener

Champlain Park Fieldhouse, 140 Cowley Ave., Ottawa

Champlain Park Garden Club (Guest fee: \$5)

**Dirty Little Underground Secrets** - The importance of soil, what it does, what it is comprised of, how we amend it, use it to fertilize and water the plants – June 11 – 6:30 pm

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener

Pineview Free Methodist Church, 14397 Hwy 41, Cloyne

Hosted by the Land O'Lakes Garden Club (Guest fee: unknown)



For information on arranging a lecture for your group: [mgottawaspeakers@gmail.com](mailto:mgottawaspeakers@gmail.com)

For more information on Master Gardeners, visit us at: <http://mgottawa.ca>



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don't re-infect the tree or spread the disease to other trees.

There are a number of methods for disinfecting secateurs, loppers or pruning saws. Some people mix up a mild bleach solution (1 part bleach to 10 parts water) and dip the tools in the solution. Bleach, however, can be corrosive and may cause the tools to rust, so ensure they are cleaned, dried thoroughly and oiled before storing.



Isopropyl or rubbing alcohol can also be used to disinfect tools. Put alcohol in a spray bottle so that the tools can be sprayed thoroughly between cuts.

The final method is to use a disinfectant cleaning product such as Lysol. It is less likely to cause tools to corrode and, if you are using a pre-diluted form, often comes in a spray bottle.

Getting back to why we prune – a major reason is to maintain plant health which will hopefully eliminate (or at least reduce) the need for safety pruning. Maintenance pruning includes taking out excess branches to open up the tree's canopy. This lets air and light through helping the tree to stay strong. Branches that cross and rub can become an entry point of infection – these would also be removed for maintenance.

Some shrubs can be rejuvenated by a good pruning. Taking out the old wood that is no longer productive will give the young growth a larger share of the plant's stored nutrients. As a rule of thumb, never remove more than 1/3 of the shrub or tree per year. A shrub can be completely rejuvenated over a 3 year period.