

Ground Cover - the perfect solution to any gardener's challenge

by Mary Ann Van Berlo

Can you guess what the most common ground cover in the world is? If you said turf grass or lawn, you're right! Unfortunately, lawns require such high maintenance that they are also the most environmentally unfriendly ground cover in use. So what is the average homeowner to do?

Consider using a different type of ground cover. Any plant can be a "ground cover" because by definition it is a plant that is used to form a dense covering of the earth to stop other plants and weeds from growing.



A front yard with ground cover as an alternative grass

However, when thinking of a lawn substitute, it is best to stay with the more commonly defined ground covers – fast spreading, low growing plants. Many such ground covers can survive moderate foot traffic and are available for different growing conditions. In fact, one plant hybridizer has named a whole line of plants "Step-ables".

If your goal is to simply have a green carpet in a sunny location, try using *Thymus* (thyme). It loves hot dry conditions. For a more interesting effect, you can mix different species of thyme such as creeping, woolly, silver or lemon thyme to create a patchwork tapestry of foliage in different shades of green, silver and gold. You will also enjoy the white, pink and mauve blooms of different varieties to add further colour. The fresh scent of thyme, as the essential oils are released when you walk over the plants, is an added bonus. Cultivars of thyme can range from ground huggers to ankle high, so pick your variety accordingly. When in bloom, bees will be busy gathering nectar from your thyme lawn, so be cautious if there are allergies to consider.



Adjug reptans 'Burgundy Flow'
Photo by Mary Ann Van Berlo

Adjug reptans (bugleweed) is another ground hugging spreader. It does well in both sun and shade and can be quite resilient in drought. There are cultivars of bugleweed available in various foliage colours including green, gold, light burgundy or a dark burgundy which is almost black. Bugleweed produces an 8-10cm blue flower spike in June which is quite attractive in a mass planting. Once the blooms are finished, run your lawnmower over the patch to deadhead. This is the only maintenance needed.

Sagina subulata (Irish moss) and *Sagina subulata* 'Aurea' (Scotch moss) are cushiony soft ground covers for sun and shade. Irish moss is a deep lush green and the Scotch moss is a chartreuse colour. They are not true mosses, but a 2cm tall spreading perennial. They feature a small white bloom in June which is attractive en masse, but not a major feature of the plants.

For the shade, consider *Vinca minor* (periwinkle). It has above-ground runners, which root anywhere they touch down making it a quick spreader. While not a ground hugger, this 25-30cm plant will form a dense mat that suppresses weeds. It has an attractive deep green leaf and blue flowers – periwinkle blue to be exact.

Another shade loving ground cover that even does well under maple trees is *Pachysandra terminalis* (Japanese spurge). At 25-30cm, its shiny, succulent leaves make it an attractive background for larger plants such as ferns and hostas or shrubs. It propagates by under-ground rhizomes which can easily be cut off and moved to a new location. It is slower to establish so be patient or plant more densely.

Establishing a ground cover may take some work – mostly to remove the existing lawn. Then simply plant individual plants at a distance of 25-30cm apart. Since by their very definition ground covers are fast growers, it shouldn't take long for them to cover distance between the plants. Water until established and then they shouldn't require any additional watering.

A further benefit of ground covers is that they increase biodiversity in our back-yard. Using a variety of ground covers will make your yard more interesting to birds and pollinators. It will also reduce the impact if pests or diseases attack. As a monoculture, lawn is severely affected when there is a prolonged drought. The right ground-covers (once established) should be able to withstand drought without watering. Similarly, by using a variety of plants, if one type is affected by a pest or disease, the whole yard is not affected. For example, grubs can attack a whole lawn and if that is all there is in the yard the damage is very visible. However, a yard with a variety of plants or ground covers might have areas of damage, but overall the yard could still look good.

I've often thought that if I had a smaller property than my current two acres, I'd eliminate the lawn altogether. A combination of ground covers and perennial beds would replace lawns and foundation plantings with no definite lines or edging between them. This somewhat informal style may not suit all tastes or lifestyles. Before going lawn-free you would need to consider what your yard is used for. Do you need a play area for children? Do you need to be able to host garden parties? Do you have a pet that needs a bit of green space for running? The answers to those questions would determine if you can eliminate part of the lawn or even the whole lawn and plant ground covers as an alternative.

Unfortunately ground covers are not maintenance free. They can grow rapidly and extend into your



flower beds. But this should not deter you from planting these versatile, hard-working plants. After all, we're already used to fighting that battle with our current ground cover, the lawn.

Thyme, Sedum & Veronica
Photo by Mary Ann Van Berlo