



YARD

Xeriscaping: Ground Cover Plants **no. 7.230**

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Quick Facts...

Ground covers are good alternatives where turfgrasses are impractical.

Suitable places for drought-tolerant ground covers include narrow strips between sidewalks or structures and steep slopes where mowing and irrigation are not practical.

Consider ground covers other than grasses on hot, dry exposures, as well as for dense shade beneath trees and shrubs.

Improve soils before planting most ground covers.

Ground cover plants are good alternatives to turfgrasses in some locations. They provide a variety of textures and colors, help reduce soil erosion, and can serve as a transition between turf areas and shrub or flower borders. Consider ground cover plants for areas where irrigation and mowing are difficult and require extra maintenance. Ground cover plants may be useful in areas such as:

- non-irrigated narrow strips between sidewalks and curbs or buildings;
- steep slopes that are impractical to mow;
- hot, dry areas along south and west exposures of walls or fences; and
- deeply shaded areas beneath trees or shrubs, along north sides of walls and fences, and in foundation plantings in front of low windows.

Ground covers also can enhance the beauty of shrub borders and can break up the monotony of areas previously covered with decorative gravel.

Soils and Exposure

The key to successful ground cover establishment is good soil conditions. Most ground covers spread by offshoots or runners and are more apt to fill in quickly where the soil has good aeration, drainage and organic matter content. Our typical heavy clay soils are not ideal, even for plants that can survive in poor soils, such as many Colorado native plants.

Pay attention to exposure. Most xeric ground covers do best in full sun, but a few thrive in partial shade. Tables 1 and 2 indicate those for sun and shade, respectively, along with some comments on their qualities as a ground cover.

Weed Control

Prior to planting ground covers, make sure that existing weeds are controlled. Perennial weeds can be especially troublesome later on if not eliminated prior to planting. Glyphosate (Roundup® or Kleenup®) controls most weeds if applied directly to actively growing weedy vegetation a few weeks prior to planting. This chemical does not leave a harmful residue in the soil, allowing planting in treated areas two weeks after spraying.

Weeds also can be discouraged by using weed barrier fabrics available in many garden centers. Anchor fabric edges with U-shaped wire pins about 6 inches long. Plant through slits cut into the barrier. Put a decorative mulch on top of the fabric. Avoid using plastic film for a weed barrier. Plastic films prevent weeds, but they also tend to suffocate plant roots and prevent water infiltration.

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Table 1: Ground cover plants for full sun.

Plant Name	Height (in)	Remarks
<i>Achillea ageratifolia</i> Greek yarrow	2-3	Gray-green foliage; spreading.
<i>Achillea tomentosa</i> Woolly yarrow	2-4	Grayish foliage in low mats.
<i>Alyssum montanum</i> Mountain alyssum	4-12	Yellow flowers; gray-green foliage; good for rock gardens.
<i>Anacyclus pyrethrum</i> var. <i>depressus</i> Mount Atlas daisy	1-3	White daisies with red undersides; silvery foliage.
<i>Antennaria dioica</i> Pussytoes	1-2	Persistent gray-green foliage in dense mats; excellent for rocky slopes.
<i>Arabis caucasica</i> (<i>alpina</i>) Rockcress	6-9	Soft, gray, spreading foliage; common variety is 'Snowcap'.
<i>Artemisia</i> spp. Sage	10-15	Silvery foliage; <i>A. schmidtiana</i> (silver mound sage) most common.
<i>Aubrieta deltoidea</i> False rockcress	4-6	Several varieties; mat-like foliage.
<i>Aurinia saxatilis</i> Basket-of-gold	8-18	Shear after bloom; good for rock gardens.
<i>Callirhoe involucrata</i> Poppy mallow, winecups	4-12	Trailing stems with saucer-like flowers.
<i>Centaurea montana</i> Perennial bachelor button	15-18	Grayish foliage; blue flowers.
<i>Cerastium tomentosum</i> Snow-in-summer	6	Gray foliage; white flowers; very aggressive.
<i>Coreopsis auriculata</i> Dwarf coreopsis	5-15	Stoloniferous mats of slender leaves; orange or yellow blooms in summer.
<i>Delosperma cooperi</i> Purple ice plant	2-4	Succulent foliage turns reddish in winter; purple flowers.
<i>Delosperma nubigenum</i> Yellow ice plant	1-2	Succulent, light-green foliage; yellow flowers.
<i>Duchesnea indica</i> Mock strawberry	4-6	Aggressive creeper; looks much like strawberry; yellow flowers; inedible, red fruit.
<i>Eriogonum umbellatum</i> Sulphur flower	6-12	Showy flower stalk to 8 inches tall; foliage in low mat.
<i>Euphorbia polychroma</i> Cushion spurge	12-18	Mounds of foliage that change from reddish to green in spring, then scarlet in fall.
<i>Festuca ovina glauca</i> Blue fescue	6-8	Tufts of grayish, grassy foliage.
<i>Frangaria vesca</i> Runnerless strawberry	2-6	Native strawberry; small edible berries.
<i>Gypsophila repens</i> Creeping baby's breath	4-6	Gray-green foliage; trailing.
<i>Juniperus horizontalis</i> Creeping juniper	4-10	Perhaps the best year-round cover; many clones and foliage hues available.
Some common clones include:		
'Bar Harbor'	10	Blue-green; purplish winter color.
'Blue Chip'	10	Bluish foliage year-round.
'Hughes'	10	Silvery-blue; distinct radial branching.
'Webberi'	4	Very low mat; fine texture.
'Wiltoni' ('Blue Rug')	4	Very low; silver-blue; purplish tinge in winter.
<i>Nepeta x faassenii</i> Catmint	15-36	Commonly sold varieties are 'Six Hills Giant' and 'Walker's Low'.
<i>Oenothera speciosa</i> Mexican evening primrose	6-12	Spreads quickly; may become invasive; pink blooms.
<i>Parthenocissus quinquefolia</i> Virginia creeper	Vine	Can use as vine or groundcover; aggressive; red fall color; commonly sold variety is 'Engelmannii'.
<i>Penstemon pinifolius</i> Pineleaf penstemon	6-10	Has needle-like leaves and orange-red flowers; takes heat well.
<i>Phlox subulata</i> Creeping phlox	6-8	Reddish, white or lavender flowers; moss-like foliage.
<i>Polygonum affine</i> Himalayan border jewel	12-18	Red, showy flowers late in season; excellent ground cover for dry areas.

Table 1 (continued): Ground cover plants for full sun.

Plant Name	Height (in)	Remarks
<i>Polygonum aubertii</i> Silverlace vine	Vine	Aggressive vine usable as ground cover.
<i>Potentilla nepalensis</i> 'Miss Willmott' Miss Willmott cinquefoil	10-16	Strawberry-like leaves; rosy-red flowers that bloom in June and July.
<i>Potentilla neumanniana</i> 'Nana' Dwarf creeping potentilla	2-4	Very low mat with yellow, showy flowers; aggressive.
<i>Prunella grandiflora</i> Self-heal	8-12	Dense mat; several varieties; can grow in part shade.
<i>Prunella laciniata</i> Lacy self heal	8-12	Fuzzy evergreen foliage; can grow in part shade.
<i>Prunus besseyi</i> Pawnee Buttes® Pawnee Buttes® sandcherry	15-18	Similar to native sandcherry but with a low, spreading habit; woody plant.
<i>Rhus aromatica</i> 'Gro-low' 'Gro-low' Fragrant sumac	24-26	Vibrant orange-red fall color; very drought tolerant; woody plant; can spread up to 8 feet in diameter.
<i>Rosa</i> x 'Sea Foam' White shrub rose	24-36	Double-white blooms; trailing groundcover or over walls; can spread up to 6 feet in diameter.
<i>Santolina chamaecyparissus</i> Lavender-cotton	12-18	Blue-gray, persistent foliage in dense mats.
<i>Saponaria ocymoides</i> Rock soapwort	6-12	Pink blooms in May and June; shear after bloom.
<i>Sedum</i> spp. Stonecrop (sedum)	1-15	Many forms available; not usually competitive with weeds.
<i>Sempervivum</i> spp. Houseleek, hen and chicks	2-4	Forms dense, evergreen mats; grows in very poor soils.
<i>Stachys byzantina</i> Lamb's ear	8-10	Furry, gray leaves resemble a lamb's ear; can be invasive unless flowerless varieties are used.
<i>Symphoricarpos</i> x <i>chenaulti</i> 'Hancock' Hancock coralberry	24-36	Can spread to 12 feet in diameter; stems root where they touch the ground; can grow in filtered shade.
<i>Tanacetum densum amani</i> Partridge feather	6-8	Finely-cut, silvery-white foliage; yellow blooms in May and June.
<i>Teucrium chamaedrys</i> Germander	8-12	Dark green leaves; evergreen; erect stems; can be sheared.
<i>Thymus praecox</i> Creeping thyme	1-4	Low growing, fragrant, evergreen foliage.
<i>Thymus praecox</i> 'Pseudolanuginosus' Woolly thyme	1-4	Mat-like, woolly-gray foliage; turns purplish in winter; sparse flowers.
<i>Thymus serpyllum</i> Mother-of-thyme	3-6	Low, mat-forming herb with tiny leaves; gray-green foliage.
<i>Thymus</i> x <i>citriodorus</i> Lemon thyme	6-12	Lemon-scented foliage.
<i>Verbena bipinnatifida</i> Plains verbena	3-6	Deeply-cut foliage; sprawling stems up to 18 inches.
<i>Veronica filiformis</i> Birdseye speedwell	1-3	Grows quickly; blue flowers bloom June through August.
<i>Veronica liwanensis</i> Turkish veronica	1-4	Dark green leaves and cobalt blue flowers bloom in May and June.
<i>Veronica pectinata</i> Woolly veronica	1-2	Low growing; gray foliage; evergreen some winters.
<i>Veronica prostrata</i> Prostrate speedwell	1-2	Dark green foliage; deep blue flowers in short spikes.
<i>Veronica spicata incana</i> Silver speedwell	12-18	Silvery foliage.
<i>Zauschneria garrettii</i> Orange Carpet® California fuchsia	4-12	Good for cascading over walls; orange tubular flowers in September and August.

Table 2: Ground cover plants for shade.

Plant Name	Height (in)	Remarks
<i>Aegopodium podagraria</i> 'Variegatum' Bishop's goutweed	10-12	Variegated, green and white foliage; aggressive.
<i>Arctostaphylos uva-ursi</i> Kinnikinnick	4-6	Evergreen; red, edible berries; use beneath established evergreens in acid soils.
<i>Convallaria majalis</i> Lily-of-the-valley	6-10	Fragrant, white flowers in May-June; inedible, red berries; aggressive.
<i>Euonymus fortunei</i> 'Coloratus' Purpleleaf wintercreeper	12-18	Foliage turns purple through winter; many other varieties available.
<i>Galium odoratum</i> Sweet woodruff	6-8	Very aggressive; one of the best covers under shrubs; white, fragrant flowers in May-June.
<i>Lonicera japonica</i> 'Halliana' Hall's Japanese honeysuckle	6-12	Will also grow in full sun, but forms denser mats in shade; fragrant white flowers.
<i>Mahonia repens</i> Creeping Oregon grape	6-12	Evergreen; yellow flowers in spring followed by bluish-purple berries; holly-like foliage.
<i>Vinca minor</i> Periwinkle	4-6	Semi-evergreen; white or purple flowers in spring.
<i>Waldsteinia ternata</i> Barren strawberry	4-10	Compact growth habit; fruit inedible.

Other Xeriscaping Fact Sheets

For more information on xeriscaping and plant selection, see these Colorado State University Extension fact sheets:

- 7.228, *Xeriscaping: Creative Landscaping*.
- 7.229, *Xeriscaping: Trees and Shrubs*.
- 7.231, *Xeriscaping: Garden Flowers*.
- 7.234, *Xeriscaping: Retrofit Your Yard*.