

GROUNDCOVERS

BY BARBARA BOWMAR



Euonymus fortunei with *Phlox x procumbens*. PHOTO: Jenny Newman

By definition, groundcovers are spreaders. They may carpet, creep or sprawl through your garden. They may be deciduous or herbaceous. Some groundcovers grow relatively slowly, some are easily controlled, and some may be considered invasive in certain growing conditions and need to be controlled or avoided. In this Fact Sheet, groundcovers are considered to be plants that are 60 cm (2 ft.) tall or less. However, the reader should be aware that different climatic conditions, seasonal length and soil conditions may produce differing habits in some of the plants described here. Groundcovers may be valued for their foliage or their bloom or both, and are valuable additions to any garden.

GROUNDCOVERS AS A LIVING MULCH

One important function groundcovers provide is a living mulch in your garden. They can:

- Check erosion on steep banks and cliffs, and stabilize in ocean-side areas.
 - Protect the soil from compaction caused by the hot sun.
 - Insulate the soil by helping to protect it from extreme heat and cold.
 - Generate humus. The spent flowers and leaves often just fall to the ground and create their own compost.
 - Reduce moisture requirements. They can be planted so that they shade the roots of their companion plants. As they prevent exposure to the soil, moisture loss is reduced and less watering is required.
- In fire-prone areas, a living mulch is preferable to bark mulches which can go up in flames in a few seconds.

GROUNDCOVERS IN GARDEN DESIGN

Groundcovers can unify your overall design:

- Planted beneath a specimen tree or shrub; they can draw the eyes to that special plant.
- They can hide what may be considered unsightly stems on some plants as well as ripening foliage and short-season plants.
- They can provide a carpet where mowing is either not needed or you cannot mow.
- They can fill in a space while the gardener is waiting for larger plants to fill in.
- They can soften the lines of hardscaping along pathways and driveways and can be planted between paving stones.

GROUNDCOVERS

ENHANCE SOUND ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICE

Environmentally, groundcovers can:

- Provide shelter, nesting places, fruit and seed for birds and small animals, and pollen and nectar for the bees and birds.
- Replace lawns or portions of lawns and the newly planted portions will require less water, less fertilizing and no mowing. Some groundcovers can withstand gentle foot traffic.
- Prevent weeds from taking hold in your garden, thereby reducing weeding chores.
- Soak up water in damp spots and they can thrive in poor, dry soils.
- Grow on banks and other difficult sites.



Front cover:
Epimedium x versicolor.
PHOTO: Vic Bentley

PEPARATION FOR PLANTING

Groundcovers, like any other plant, require 15–20 cm (6–8 in.) of good soil. They need organic matter and an appropriate amount of water.

If you are replacing your lawn or reclaiming a weedy area, first clear the weeds, cut the grass very short and soak the ground well. Then cover the ground with several inches of wet newspaper, and a layer of manure and wood chips. Within a year, you will have a weed-free piece of ground ready for working. In coastal areas, you will find that the paper and the weeds or lawn underneath decompose quickly. In the Interior and because of the lack of moisture, you will find that the process takes longer and you will need to keep the area moist to aid with decomposition during that first year.

MAINTENANCE

While we may consider groundcovers to be relatively low maintenance, they do need to be watered, fertilized, divided and pruned from time to time. Control invasive groundcovers by dividing frequently or contain them by using an edging strip.



Hostas. PHOTO: Janet Sawatsky

CHOOSING GROUNDCOVERS

Assess your site and your objectives. *Stachys byzantina* (Woolly lamb's ears) loves the full sun and will do well in a location that would fry ferns. Is your site largely in sun or shade? Is the site dry or moist? Consider the natural growing conditions needed by the plants. For example, some people complain that Kinnikinnick (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) is invasive. This plant grows naturally in the wild where nature provides the only source of moisture. If you plant it in a garden with a timed watering system, it can and will become invasive.

Do you want to cover a large steep bank? If so, prostrate junipers might be a good choice. On a more moderate bank, consider Meidland roses or groundcovers with spreading root systems such as a low-growing *Cotoneaster*.

What color do you want? Groundcover foliage varies from silver grays through to blues, greens and yellows. The flowers on groundcovers may last a relatively short time so carefully look at the color of the foliage and decide what effect you want.

Start with healthy plants. When you buy plants from a nursery, read the tags carefully to determine the spread, height and appropriate growing conditions. Groundcovers may also be found at community plant sales, an inexpensive source but be careful that you are not buying invasive plants or plants containing weed roots. Kind neighbours are often willing to share groundcovers with other gardeners.

SUGGESTED CHOICES

The table lists a number of suggested choices for groundcovers. Some are appropriate for the climate of the coast and Vancouver Island; others are suited to the semi-arid Interior areas. There are suggestions for a wide variety of circumstances.

Name	Min. zone	Height (cm)	Description	Growing conditions
<i>Achillea tomentosa</i> Woolly yarrow	3	30	Small, vivid yellow flowers in flat clusters	Well-drained soil, full sun
<i>Antennaria rosea</i> Pink pussytoes	4	10–30	Tiny off-white, pink-tipped flowers	Good for hot, dry spots in the garden or rock gardens. Native
<i>Arctostaphylos uva-ursi</i> Bearberry, Kinnikinnik	4	3	Shiny green leaves; white to light pink flowers; red berries in fall	Native to BC. Hot, dry sunny areas. Good on slopes. Dry shade/part shade in the Interior.
<i>Artemisia stellerana</i> Silver brocade	5	10	Grey foliage; insignificant flowers	Well-drained, sandy soil; full sun. Spreads slowly.
<i>Asarum europaeum</i> European ginger	4	13–18	Shiny green foliage; tiny flowers bloom under the foliage in spring	Part shade. Does best in moisture-retentive soil.
<i>Calluna vulgaris</i> Heather	5	45	White, light pink, dark pink flowers; blooms late summer/autumn	Thrives in acid soils
<i>Cotoneaster horizontalis</i>	5	60–90	Small pink flowers in spring; shiny dark leaves turn red in the fall	Light well-drained soil. Needs organic matter.
<i>Delosperma cooperi</i> Ice plant	5	15	Hot pink flowers	Full sun; well-drained soil. Adapts to hot dry conditions. Does not tolerate heavy snow pack or moist conditions in winter. Seldom bothered by deer.
<i>Epimedium</i>	4	30	Red or yellow flowers; leaves purple/red in early spring becoming green later.	Takes full shade and soil rich in organic matter. Moderate to dry conditions.
<i>Erica cinerea</i> (often listed with <i>Calluna vulgaris</i>) Bell Heather	6	30	Blooms winter/spring; spikes of carmine pink flowers	Acid soil
<i>Euonymus fortunei</i>	5	30–60	Waxy, green leaves become red in the fall.	Sun to part shade. Good for dry shady places.
<i>Festuca glauca</i> Blue fescue var. 'Elijah blue'	4	30	Insignificant flowers; silver blue narrow blades.	Well-drained soil to dry; full sun to dry part shade.
<i>Galium odoratum</i> Sweet woodruff	3	15–30	In spring, loose clusters of small star-shaped flowers.	Well-drained but moist soil; part to full shade. Can be invasive.
<i>Heuchera</i> Coral Bells	4	15–60	Hybridization has produced exotic leaf colours and textures; flowers are small and range from white through red.	Full sun to light shade. In sun, well-drained but moist soil. Tolerates dry shade.
<i>Hypericum calycinum</i> St. John's wort	6	30–45	Bright yellow flowers all summer; blue green leaves.	Sun or shade. Tolerates low water. Can be invasive in moist soil. May be useful for erosion control on sandy slopes.
<i>Hosta</i>	3	15–60	Green or variegated leaves; flowers appear on tall spikes.	Rich, well-drained, moist soil. Partial to full shade.
<i>Juniperus horizontalis</i>	3	15–45	Low-growing evergreen shrub. Blue-green leaves; dark fruit in late summer.	Tolerates any soil but prefers sandy, well-drained soil. Ideal for covering steep slopes.
<i>Nepeta</i> Cat mint	2	45	Purple flowers	Lower growing varieties include 'Dropmore' and <i>N. racemosa</i> 'Walker's Low'.
<i>Pachysandra procumbens</i>	3	20	Evergreen	Tolerates dry shade
<i>Penstemon fruticosus</i>	5	45	Evergreen. Purple flowers	Native to the interior of BC. Full sun and dry well-drained soil.
<i>Polygonum affine</i> Fleeceflower		16–20	Spikes of pink flowers all season. Foliage turns russet in the fall and persists into winter	Sun to light shade. Can grow leggy in rich soils. Best in low water.
<i>Rosa</i> spp. Flower Carpet, Meidland alba (white), Pink Seafoam, The Fairy (pink)	4	Up to 60	Blooms all summer	Moderate moisture
<i>Santolina chamaecyparissus</i> Cotton lavender	4	30-45	Yellow, petal-less flowers. Silver foliage persists through the winter.	Dry, well-drained, infertile soil. Tolerates sun, heat, wind, alkaline soils.
<i>Stachys byzantina</i> Woolly lamb's ears	4	20–40	Leaves are gray, fuzzy and soft. Pink flowers on flowering stems in early to midsummer.	Drought tolerant. Full, hot sun to light shade. Competes well with tree roots.
<i>Sedum spectabile</i> Stonecrop	3	45–60	Flowers form large, flat, white, pink or red heads.	Full sun or light shade. Dry, well-drained soil.
<i>Sedum kamtschaticum</i> Stonecrop	4	5–8	Semi evergreen. Over-wintering rosettes. Clusters of star-shaped yellow flowers in summer and autumn.	Sun. Grows well in any soil.
<i>Thymus</i> Thyme	2	3	Evergreen or grey-green foliage. White, pink, red or purple flowers.	Full sun to part shade. Does best in dry conditions and poor soil. Moderate foot traffic. Grows well between pavers and edges of hardscaping.
<i>Tiarella cordifolia</i> Foam flower	3	15–60	Spikes of tiny white flowers in spring. Green leaves turn bronze in the fall.	Light shade. Well-drained, moist soil.



Penstemon 'Sour Grapes' PHOTO: Vic Bentley

The following groundcovers can, depending on the growing conditions, be considered invasive and should be used with caution:

- Aegopodium podagraria* (Gout weed)
- Ajuga reptans* (Bugle weed)
- Cerastium tomentosum* (Snow in summer)
- Convallaria majalis* (Lily of the valley)
- Lysimachia nummularia* (Creeping Jenny)
- Lamium maculatum* (Dead nettle)
- Galium odoratum* (Sweet woodruff – can be invasive in moist soil)
- Sedum acre* (Stonewort)
- Vinca minor* (Lesser periwinkle).



Stachys byzantina PHOTO: Vic Bentley



Tiarella spp. PHOTO: Vic Bentley



Master Gardeners Association of British Columbia

The Master Gardeners Association of British Columbia is a volunteer organization providing information about gardening and horticulture to the community and educating people about environmentally responsible gardening practices.

Through its chapters in Vancouver, Victoria, Summerland, Vancouver Island and Prince George, the MGABC

- runs a series of clinics at garden centers and major garden events
- presents gardening programmes in schools, hospitals and seniors' homes
- works with community groups on various "greening" projects.

Most of the 700 Master Gardeners in BC are enthusiastic amateurs; some are experienced professionals — all of us have a passion for gardening. We share this passion with the public and promote the enjoyment of gardening through a variety of volunteer projects and activities.

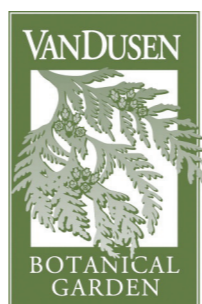
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