

Ground Covers

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What's a ground cover? I have always thought of ground covers as very low, creeping plants that hug the ground. Recently, I've come to a new understanding. Yes, they can be low, creeping and hug the ground and so much more. The question now becomes: "What Do I Want From A Ground Cover?" Sometimes we are faced with challenging sites where plants have failed to thrive. Whether it's dry shade, acidic conditions, slopes, erosion control, weed control or hot spots, ground covers can offer solutions for every situation.

Let's take a look at the traditional backyard grassy lawn. Today we are being encouraged to reduce the size of our lawns for some very good reasons. By replacing some part of the lawn with ground covers, there are benefits to the environment. We can reduce the use of fertilizers and pesticides, reduce domestic water use and reduce air pollution and fossil fuel consumption. Another benefit is less time spent mowing and that means more time to play in the garden. Two possible substitutes are Dutch White Clover and Thyme. Dutch White Clover is a quick growing ground cover that chokes out weeds, enriches the soil and is low maintenance. It tolerates foot traffic and can be mowed, if necessary. Thyme (*Thymus serpyllifolius*, *Coccineum* 'Pink Chintz') is another option for turf replacement. It is a vigorous mat forming spreader that withstands dry conditions and foot traffic. The pleasant fragrance and spring blooms are a bonus.

One of my favorite problem solving ground covers is *Ajuga reptans* 'Bronze Beauty'. In spring, lovely blue flower spikes complement the purple bronze foliage. When given the right conditions, *Ajuga* forms a dense mat that few weeds can penetrate and it is deer resistant, too. Excellent drainage is a must.

For years I struggled with a hot spot next to my gravel driveway in full sun. I decided to try low growing Sedums. These plants are just what the site called for and I now have a lovely tapestry of texture and color. Two Sedums, in particular, that have done well for me in this site are *S. spurium* 'Dragon's Blood' with its wine tinged foliage and red flowers in summer, and *S. spurium* 'John Creech'. Both are heat and drought tolerant mat forming spreaders.

Maple trees are notorious for creating dry shade as well as taking up water and nutrients. In this situation *Lamium galeobdolon* 'Yellow archangel' has performed very well. The green and silver leaves are handsome and bear little yellow flowers in spring. It is a vigorous spreader that tolerates most soils. It can overrun delicate perennials and some vigilance may be necessary to keep it within bounds. Oh, yes, it is deer resistant.

One more ground cover I'd like to mention is *Ceratostigma plumbaginoides*. This is such a beauty, offering three seasons of interest. It comes up late, and therefore, is a good choice of over planting bulbs. In late summer it bears the most brilliant blue flowers and in the fall the deep green foliage turns red. In well-drained soil, it spreads nicely over a couple of seasons and is tough and long-lived.

This is just a small sampling of ground covers and the role they can play in the garden. Every season I continue to discover their versatility, beauty and problem solving capabilities.