



YARD

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

by J.R. Feucht¹

Quick Facts...

Ground covers are good alternatives where turfgrasses are impractical.

Suitable places for ground covers include narrow strips between sidewalks or structures and steep slopes where mowing is 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 ground covers.

Ground cover plants are good alternatives to turfgrasses in some locations. They provide a variety of textures and color, 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 watering and mowing are difficult, that require extra maintenance, or that are unsuitable for grass due to exposure, such as:

- 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 content. Heavy clay soils are not suitable even for plants that can survive in poor soils.

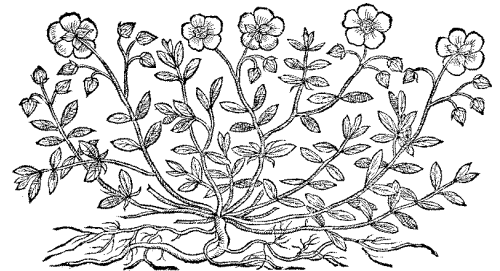
Pay attention to exposure. Most xeric ground covers do best in full sun, but a few thrive better in at least partial shade. Tables 1 and 2 indicate those for shade or sun along with some comments on their qualities as a ground cover.

Weed Control

Prior to planting ground covers, make sure that existing weeds are hoed, pulled or chemically controlled. Perennial weeds can be especially troublesome later if not eliminated prior to planting. Glyphosate (Roundup or Kleenup) controls most weeds if applied to weedy vegetation a few weeks

prior to planting. This chemical does not leave a harmful residue in the soil, allowing planting in treated areas a week 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.



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Table 1: Ground cover plants for full sun.

Plant Name	Height (in)	Remarks
<i>Achillea tomentosa</i> Woolly yarrow	2-4	Grayish foliage in low mats.
<i>Antennaria</i> spp. Pussytoes	1-2	Persistent gray-green foliage in dense mats; excellent for rocky slopes.
<i>Artemisia</i> spp. Sage	10-15	Silvery foliage; <i>A. schmidtiana</i> (silver mound sage) most common.
<i>Atriplex corrugata</i> Mat saltbush	4-6	Evergreen; foliage greenish-white; for salty soils.
<i>Centaurea montana</i> (perennial bachelor button) Mountain bluet	15-18	Grayish foliage; blue flowers.
<i>Cerastium tomentosum</i> Snow-in-summer	6	Gray foliage; white flowers; very aggressive.
<i>Cytisus decumbens</i> Creeping broom	4-8	Green stems with tiny leaves; yellow, pea-like flowers in May.
<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	3-6	Showy flower stalk to 8 inches tall; foliage in low mat.
<i>Euphorbia epithymoides</i> (<i>polychroma</i>) Cushion spurge	12-18	Mounds of foliage that change from reddish to green in spring, then scarlet in fall.
<i>Euphorbia marginata</i> Snow-on-the-mountain	4-8	Green and white foliage; very aggressive.
<i>Festuca ovina glauca</i> Blue fescue	6-8	Tufts of grayish, grassy foliage.
<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>Penstemon pinifolius</i> Pineleaf penstemon	6-10	Has needle-like leaves and orange-red flowers; takes heat well.
<i>Phlox subulata</i> Moss pink or 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.
<i>Potentilla verna</i> Creeping potentilla	1/2-1	Very low mat with yellow, showy flowers; aggressive.
<i>Ranunculus repens</i> Creeping buttercup	1-2	Yellow, showy flowers on creeping runners up to 2 feet long.
<i>Santolina chamaecyparissus</i> Lavender-cotton	10-12	Blue-gray, persistent foliage in dense mats.
<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>Thymus serpyllum</i> Mother-of-thyme	3-6	Low, mat-forming herb with tiny leaves; purple flowers; related species, woolly thyme, has gray-green foliage.
<i>Veronica prostrata</i> Prostrate speedwell	1-2	Dark green foliage; deep blue flowers in short spikes.

Table 2: Ground cover plants for shade.

Plant Name	Height (in)	Remarks
<i>Aegopodium podagraria</i> 'variegatum' Bishop's weed	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>Campanula carpatica</i> Carpathian harebell	6-14	Can be aggressive; blue or white flowers.
<i>Convallaria majalis</i> Lily-of-the-valley	6-10	Fragrant, white flowers in May-June; inedible, red berries; aggressive.
<i>Galium odorata</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.
<i>Mahonia repens</i> Creeping Oregon grape	6-12	Evergreen; yellow flowers in spring; holly-like foliage.
<i>Penstemon caespitosus</i> Creeping or mat penstemon	1-2	Very prostrate mat of tiny narrow leaves; flowers in May-June; purplish.
<i>P. strictus</i> Rocky Mountain penstemon	1-2	Blue flowers in June-July.
<i>Vinca minor</i> Periwinkle	4-6	Semievergreen; white or purple flowers in spring.

Other Xeriscaping Fact Sheets

For more information on xeriscaping and plant selection, see these Cooperative 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*.

¹J.R. Feucht, Colorado State University
Cooperative Extension landscape plants
specialist and professor (retired), horticulture.
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Advisory Committee for Xeriscape Front
Range, an affiliate of the National Xeriscape
Council, Inc. Reviewed by D.E. Whiting,
Cooperative Extension ornamental
horticulture specialist, horticulture and
landscape architecture.

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