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FEATURED NATIVE PLANT



# Hold Your Ground

Where there are challenges, groundcovers fit the bill

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY KAREN BUSSOLINI



**M**OST OF US HAVE problem spots in our yards where “we can’t get anything to grow” – a steep rocky slope, wet area or deep shade. Maybe it’s a struggling lawn or one we wish were smaller. These are prime locations for groundcovers. And consider those garden beds and trees that seem randomly placed across the lawn. Connecting disjointed plantings with beds of groundcovers simplifies mowing, creates a graceful flow, and prevents damage to trees from mowers or string trimmers.

Both in my Connecticut-based garden coaching practice and my far-flung travels as a garden photographer, I see non-native groundcovers functioning something like wall-to-wall carpeting, unnoticed, even when they escape into natural areas. I encourage my clients to look at perceived problems as opportunities to enhance their landscapes with self-reliant, wildlife-supporting native plants. Instead of trying to get things to grow, we consider what wants to be there. Many native plants that tenaciously hold their ground in tough spots are far too beautiful to fade into the background.

Plants already waiting in the wings offer good clues to what will cover ground in those tricky niches. In the north you might see mosses and wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*) or Canada mayflower (*Maianthemum canadense*) along shady edges. In Texas, cedar sage (*Salvia roemeriana*) seeds in under junipers, blue mist flower (*Conoclinium coelestinum*) colonizes moist woods and palm-leaf mist flower (*C. greggii*) occupies seasonally flooded gravelly soils. Look at what grows along the roadside, too, especially in difficult soils like caliche, for inspiration and perhaps judicious seed-collecting. Ferns and native sedges frequently colonize lawn’s edge, just waiting for someone to stop mowing them down. Sedges are widely distributed, for



**OPPOSITE:** Short-toothed mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum muticum*) is an aggressive groundcovering supporter of beneficial insects. **ABOVE TOP:** Heartleaf foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*) is perfect for shady sites. **BOTTOM:** A sweep of *Phlox stolonifera* punctuated by Christmas ferns (*Polystichum acrostichoides*) in the author's woodland.



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example *Carex texensis* in sandy soils and piney woods and *C. pensylvanica* in deciduous woodlands. Common native grasses or swaths of herbaceous perennials provide habitat and ease the transition between tended yard and wild places.

Plants that do the job in one part of the country won't necessarily work elsewhere. Fine-textured Mexican feather grass (*Nassella tenuissima*) self-sows into a gorgeous ground cover for sun in the dry south and west but rarely survives cold, wet New England winters. Purchase vigorous, locally adapted plants at local specialty nurseries or plant sales, beg divisions from a friend or buy mail-order. Look for mat-formers, overlapping or densely clustered leaves, plants that shade out the competition by sprawling or seeding thickly. Most spread by stolons (horizontal stems that form roots where they touch the earth) or rhizomes (underground stems that send up shoots along their length). Consider height and relative competitiveness. Do they need to stop erosion, duke it out with invasive plants or merely form a low-care carpet in a culti-



vated bed? Mix and mingle plants with similar vigor for a garden-like look without garden-like work.

People in hot, dry climates need plants like Gregg's prairie clover (*Dalea greggii*) and silver ponyfoot (*Dichondra argentea*) to tackle the challenge of fierce sun. I'm more often called upon to solve the "problem" of shade. My favorites are deer-resistant heat- and cold-tolerant plants with wide ranges – some from Texas or the deep South extend all the way into Canada – that thrive in woodland soils, are adaptable to varying amounts of sun and moisture and support lots of beneficial insects. Green and Gold (*Chrysogonum virginianum*) thrives on neglect, arches over shallow roots and often self-sows. Good for edging or mingling with other woodland natives, this low-grower takes full sun in moist well-drained soil, full shade in dry soils. Its yellow star flowers bloom April through October. Foam flower (*Tiarella cordifolia*) produces frothy clouds of white inflorescences above maple-shaped leaves, feeding native bees and beneficial insects for 5-6 weeks in spring. Overlapping leaves discourage weeds but foamflower also plays well with others. Creeping phlox (*Phlox stolonifera*) will prevent erosion on a steep slope, yet is a polite garden companion in part sun or shade. Long-lasting lavender, pink or white flowers rising above semi-evergreen mats of tidy rounded foliage attract hummingbirds. Christmas ferns (*Polystichum acrostichoides*) are champs in deep, dry shade here in the north, but require more moisture where it's hot and dry. Glossy evergreen clumps increase in size and can be divided and redistributed.

For wet squishy soil, three aggressive – but outstanding – characters tolerate drier soils too and are invaluable for making the transition from sun to shade. Golden groundsel (*Packera aurea*) forms a low dense mat of shiny basal foliage that inhibits invasive seed germination, yet it will mingle with plants established before it fills in. Brassy long-blooming gold



**ABOVE:** Green and purple-leaved forms of *Heuchera villosa* mingle with *Carex nigra* and *Tiarella cordifolia* in a garden by Larry Weaner Landscape Design Associates.

**BELOW LEFT:** Golden groundsel (*Packera aurea*) in moist soil beneath 'Heritage' river birch in a garden designed by Ana Hajduk.

flowers on 2-3 foot stems are an important nectar and pollen source for native bees. Roundleaf groundsel (*Packera obovata*) is common south into Mexico, in limestone soils. Tall, rambunctious short-toothed mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum muticum*) shines with silvery bracts surrounding small pinkish flower clusters abuzz with insect activity. It's an even match for *Physostegia virginiana* and *Monarda didyma*, but will overrun less vigorous plants. Give it room to run and it makes a great deer-proof edge plant near pond or woods. Northern sea oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*) is too aggressively self-sowing for garden use, but is it ever beautiful on wet and wild edges.

So when you have a need for groundcover, think less "wall to wall carpet" and more "low-care lovely native plants that support wildlife, suppress weeds and demand attention – but not the hands-on kind. ☼

*Karen Bussolini is a nationally known speaker on environmental gardening and an eco-friendly garden coach devoted to teaching homeowners how to landscape more sustainably.*