

Text and photos
by Karen Bussolini

ALTERNATIVES TO GRASS CAN BE

ATTRACTIVE, SELF-SUSTAINING, AND LOW-MAINTENANCE.

CARPET

YOUR

EARTH

LANDSCAPE DESIGN

GROUND COVER PLANTS, lovely in plantings large or small, are suitable for just about any environment. In addition to having practical purposes and aesthetic benefits, ground covers, once established, give the gardener—and the lawn mower—many hours of rest and relaxation. Choices of these perennial, low-fuss options abound. Here are some to consider—and why.



Lungwort



Creeping mazus



Mesa Verde ice plant



Bigroot geranium



'Behm' palm sedge



Golden ragwort



'Candy Stripe' moss phlox and spotted deadnettle

THE CHALLENGE—AND DELIGHT—WHEN INTRODUCING ANY NEW PLANTS IS FINDING

THOSE THAT MATCH YOUR PURPOSE AND CONDITIONS.

FOR ALL PRACTICAL PURPOSES

- Ground covers can . . .
- outcompete or prevent germination of weed seeds
 - cool the soil
 - allow water to soak into the soil, thus reducing erosion and the impact of heavy rains
 - colonize steep or rocky areas that are difficult to mow
 - thrive in shade
 - fill in between stepping-stones or be a pathway
 - buffer trees and shrubs from lawn mowers and string trimmers

AS AN ARTFUL INFLUENCE

- Ground covers can . . .
- provide long-lasting color and seasonally changing texture
 - knit together disparate plantings
 - give the eye a place to rest
 - gracefully transition between gardens and natural surroundings

CONTINUED ON PAGE 60

IF PLANTS GET WHAT THEY NEED FROM THE BEGINNING, THEY'LL BE OFF TO A GOOD START.

Lenten rose



Barrenwort



Creeping phlox



GROUND RULES

The challenge—and delight—when introducing any new plants is finding those that match your purpose and conditions.

For example, a single variety introduces a uniform visual texture, while a mix of compatible varieties can create a sense of flow, linking flower beds, gardens, and other areas.

Growing habits can vary. Some

ground covers form clumps that fill in empty spaces as they grow larger and may also self-sow. Others spread and form new plants by underground runners (rhizomes) or stems (stolons).

Native plants naturalize on site and provide food and cover for local insects and wildlife.

Here is a selection of adaptable, deer-resistant, and hardy (to Zone 5) ground covers offering a wide range of features.

Shady Characters

These woodland plants mix and mingle well in shady settings.

Barrenwort (*Epimedium* spp.). Barrenwort may look delicate, but it's tough enough to thrive in dry

shade. Stems bearing sprays of small flowers resembling miniature daffodils often emerge earlier than its heart-shaped leaves. Vigorous *E. x rubrum* and *E. x versicolor* 'Sulphureum' keep their leaves well into winter. Spreading; 8 to 12 inches tall.

Creeping phlox (*Phlox stolonifera*). Perfect in a shade garden or woodlands with rich organic soil, this semi-evergreen specimen forms a low carpet of small, rounded leaves. It blooms in early spring, sending up stems of single flowers in shades of purple that attract hummingbirds. Spreading; 2 inches tall, with 6- to 8-inch bloom stalks. Native.

Allegheny spurge (*Pachysandra procumbens*). Far lovelier than its in-

vasive Asian cousin *P. terminalis*, this bold-texture ground cover spreads slowly. Large, deeply cut, dark green, semi-evergreen leaves are often marbled in silver or purple. Early spring spikes of white flowers are followed by crisp, fresh, new foliage. Spreading; 6 to 10 inches tall. Native.

Lungwort (*Pulmonaria* spp.). What's not to love about a plant that is in bud as soon as the snow melts, full of nectar for the early pollinators? For a mottled silver carpet, start with silver-leaf cultivars such as 'Majeste', 'Excalibur', 'Silver Streamers', 'Cotton Cool', and 'Samurai'. They will self-sow if you don't deadhead. Clumping; 8 to 15 inches tall.

Christmas fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*). This dark, glossy, green fern thrives in the deepest shade, even in dry soil and rock crevices. It makes a reliably evergreen mass planting and can be increased by dividing. Clumping; 12 to 18 inches tall.

In-betweeners

These plants grow well in semishade (filtered light or 3 to 6 hours of direct sun each day).

Bigroot geranium (*Geranium macrorrhizum*). Soft, intensely aromatic leaves form tidy colonies that flow around any obstacle. Shade and drought tolerant, bigroot geraniums do well even under maple trees, and weeds don't have a chance under their smothering blanket. Small pink, white, or magenta flowers rise above the foliage in early summer. Leaves turn red and bronze in fall. Spreading; 8 to 10 inches tall.

Lenten rose (*Helleborus* hybrids). Modern hellebore strains such as the Brandywine and Lady series are reliably evergreen, with glossy, dark leaves that stand up to snow. Single roselike flowers in shades of pink, burgundy, chartreuse, or white appear for up to 3 months, followed by fresh

new leaves. Resist deadheading, if you'd like more—hellebores self-sow freely. Clumping; 12 to 16 inches tall.

Spotted deadnettle (*Lamium maculatum*). Mats of heart-shaped leaves marked with patterns of silver and green bear pink-to-white flower clusters in early summer. 'White Nancy', 'Red Nancy', 'Shell Pink', and 'Beacon Silver' are vigorous but well-behaved varieties. Spreading clumps; 4 to 8 inches tall.

Golden ragwort (*Packera aurea*). Once this moisture lover gets going, its vigorous mats of basal foliage smother anything that gets in the way. Brassy, golden, daisylike flowers support butterflies and beneficial insects. Spreading; 2 inches tall, 12- to 14-inch bloom stalks. Native.

INVASIVES TO AVOID

Fast-spreading English ivy (*Hedera helix*), lesser periwinkle (*Vinca minor*), and boxwood blight-spreading Japanese spurge (*Pachysandra terminalis*) are on invasive plant lists in many states.

Sedge (*Carex* spp.). Taller than turf, these showy, grasslike plants are excellent substitutes for traditional lawn grasses, without the upkeep. Consider these three:

- **Variegated sedge** (*C. morrowii* 'Ice Dance'). Green blades with bright white edges brighten the shade and make an impenetrable turf that looks good all winter. Spreading; 12 inches tall.

- **Palm sedge** (*C. muskingumensis* 'Oehme'). Exotic-looking and graceful in green with yellow stripes, this is best suited to moist soils. Clumping; 20 inches tall. Native.

- **Pennsylvania sedge** (*C. pennsylvanica*). Very fine-textured, this woodlander grows in semishady places with acidic soil. Spreading; 6 to 12 inches tall. Native.

Sun Lovers

For sunny and hot areas, easy-to-grow options abound.

Angelina stonecrop (*Sedum rupestre* 'Angelina'). Great for poor, dry soil, this cheery yellow succulent forms vigorous low mats that turn coppery in winter. Spreading; 6 to 8 inches tall.

Moss phlox (*Phlox subulata*). Blooming in subtle to vivid pinks and purples, as well as white, this fine-texture creeper prefers well-draining sandy or rocky soil. Spreading mats, may self-sow; 3 to 6 inches tall. Native.

Three-toothed cinquefoil (*Potentilla tridentata*). Coming from cold, rocky places with acidic soils, this fine-texture evergreen creeper is hardy to Zone 2. It loves tiny crevices and makes a fine companion for rhododendrons and other acid-loving shrubs. Spreading; 3 to 12 inches tall. Native.

Lambs' ears (*Stachys byzantina*). Soft, silvery "ears" that spread by rooting where stems touch the ground are unfussy garden classics that also shine as ground covers. Spreading; 6 to 18 inches tall.

Hardy ice plant (*Delosperma* spp.). Resembling sedums but with Day-Glo-color daisy flowers that bloom all summer, ice plants suppress weeds without smothering spring bulbs. They like summer rain and humidity and tolerate all but waterlogged soils. Spreading; ½ inch to 6 inches tall.

Fragrant sumac (*Rhus aromatica* 'Gro-Low'). This suckering shrub comes to the rescue in places too steep or rocky to mow. Stems work their way around obstacles and form dense colonies. Spreading; 1 to 2 feet tall. Native.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 62

ONCE PLANTS BECOME ESTABLISHED, THEY SERVE AS LIVING MULCH.



Angelina stonecrop and lamb's ears



Creeping bugleweed



'Gro-Low' fragrant sumac

Lawn Alternatives

There's nothing like turf grass if you want to play football or make high-traffic planted paths. But for the uniform look of lawn without the work, "Low-Mow" grass mixes, low fescues for shade, and native grasses such as Buffalo grass are increasingly available.

For a blooming lawn, try . . .

Creeping thyme (*Thymus* spp.). These fragrant tiny thymes are available in a dizzying array of foliage and flower colors. Look for cultivars of species listed as *T. praecox*, *T. serpyllum*, or *T. polytrichus*. Good for Xeriscapes, thymes require full sun and well-drained soil. Spreading; 1 to 2 inches tall.

Creeping bugleweed (*Ajuga reptans*). This evergreen comes in many colors—rosy tricolor, purple, and mahogany, for example—and spreads fast. Enjoy blue or white flower spikes

in spring. Spreading; 1 to 3 inches tall, bloom stalks 6 to 8 inches.

Creeping mazus (*Mazus reptans*). A tiny-leaf creeper with snapdragon-like, purplish flowers, mazus mingles with lawn grasses, roots stems between stepping-stones, and spreads quickly in damp soil. Spreading; 1 to 2 inches tall.

PREPARING THE GROUND

If plants get what they need from the beginning—sun or shade, moisture or good drainage, rich or poor soil—they'll be off to a good start.

Before planting, remove all unde-

sirable plants. One method involves smothering existing vegetation: Cover with sheets of cardboard or newspaper. Spread wood chips or straw on top. Allow to decompose for a couple of months.

Plant seedlings and mulch bare ground to preserve moisture and keep weeds down. Water between the plants so that their roots move into unoccupied territory.

Once plants become established, they serve as a living mulch. With most woodland ground covers, there is no need for leaf cleanup in the fall. The leaves from the trees will settle between the plants and provide winter insulation, suppress weeds, and enrich the soil as they decompose.

Karen Bussolini is a garden photographer, writer and lecturer, and eco-friendly garden coach who lives in South Kent, Connecticut.