

Xeriscaping: Ground Cover Plants

Fact Sheet 7.230

Gardening Series | Yard

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Revised by L. Langelo**

Ground cover plants are appealing for their variety of ornamental features that add interest to landscapes. They provide a variety of textures and colors, help to reduce soil erosion and can function as a transition between landscape spaces. They offer alternatives to turfgrasses in some situations.

A ground cover should spread by itself. Species that produce rhizomes or stolons or that spread by offsets or tip layering are good choices for ground covers. Ideally, they will develop rapidly into a dense cover. Some grow so fast they can become invasive.

Ground covers also can enhance the beauty of shrub borders and break up the monotony of mulched areas. Xeric ground cover plants may be the answer for difficult landscape areas that are difficult to mow or water, require extra maintenance or are less suitable for turfgrass such as:

- landscaped medians, parking strips, traffic islands and rights-of-way along streets;
- steep slopes that are impractical in lawns or a mowing hazard;
- hot, dry areas on south and west exposures;
- deeply shaded areas beneath trees or shrubs, along north sides of walls and fences, between buildings and in front of low windows.

Soils and Exposure

The key to successful ground cover establishment is good soil preparation. Some ground covers spread by offshoots or runners and are more apt to fill in quickly where the soil has good aeration and drainage. Improve soils with good quality organic matter before planting. Incorporate 3 to 5 cubic yards of compost or other organic soil amendment into 1000 square feet of area.

Pay attention to exposure. Tables 1 and 2 indicate ground cover plants for sun or shade as well as bloom characteristics and useful comments.

Weed Control and Maintenance

Prior to planting ground covers, make sure that existing weeds are hoed, pulled or killed with an herbicide. Perennial weeds can be especially troublesome later if not eliminated prior to planting. Glyphosate herbicide controls many weeds if applied a few weeks prior to planting. This herbicide does not leave a harmful soil residue, allowing planting in treated areas 10 to 14 days after spraying. Follow label directions when using.



Quick Facts

- Plants that are low-growing (generally less than 24 inches) and spread easily are suitable ground cover plants.
- Suitable places for xeric ground covers include dry slopes, landscape medians, parking strips, traffic islands and street rights-of-way.
- Consider ground covers on hot, dry, south and west exposures as well as for dense, dry shade.
- Improve soils before planting ground covers.
- Ideally, a ground cover should grow dense enough or be mulched to inhibit weeds.

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Weeds can be discouraged by using weed barrier fabrics, anchoring with U-shaped wire pins. Plant through slits cut into the barrier. Apply mulch on top of the fabric. Avoid the use of solid sheet plastic as a weed barrier.

All ground covers require maintenance, some more than others. Ground covers that develop flowers and fruit often require more maintenance than evergreen ground covers.

Table 1. Xeric ground cover plants for full sun.

Plant Name	Height (in)	Flower Color	Bloom time	Remarks
<i>Achillea serbica</i> Serbian yarrow	4-8	White	Spring	Toothed, gray leaves
<i>Achillea tomentosa</i> Woolly yarrow	2-4	Yellow	Summer	Woolly, gray foliage in low mats
<i>Antennaria dioica</i> Pussytoes	1-2	White to pink	Late spring to early summer	Persistent gray-green foliage in dense mats; excellent for rocky slopes
<i>Artemisia frigidula</i> Fringed sage	6-15	Yellow	Late summer	Blooms not showy, silver gray fringed foliage, woody stems
<i>Bouteloua gracilis</i> Blue grama grass	12-18	Tan	Summer to fall	Clump-forming native, sow seed to form solid cover, shade intolerant
<i>Callirhoe involucrata</i> Prairie winecups	6-12	Red	Summer to fall	Vigorous trailing stems, Plant Select®
<i>Cerastium tomentosum</i> Snow-in-summer	6-8	White	Spring to summer	Gray foliage, aggressive spreader
<i>Cerastium plumbaginoides</i> Plumbago	8-12	Violet-blue	Late summer to fall	Shiny green leaves, purplish fall leaf color
<i>Delosperma sp.</i> Iceplant	1-6	Red, yellow, white, fuchsia	Spring to fall	Succulent leaves
<i>D. floribundum</i> 'Starburst'	4-6	Pink with white centers	Summer to fall	Cushion growth form, requires dry soil in winters, Plant Select®
<i>D. 'John Proffit'</i> Table Mountain	2-4	Fuchsia	Spring to fall	Durable, leaves turn purple in winter, Plant Select®
<i>D. 'Kelaidis'</i> ^{PP#12,876} Mesa Verde	2-4	Salmon-pink	Spring to fall	Vigorous, compact habit, Plant Select®
<i>D. nubigenum</i> Hardy Yellow	1-2	Yellow	Early to mid summer	Light green, compact foliage turns purplish in winter
<i>D. 'Psfave'</i> LAVENDER ICE™	2-3	Lavender	Spring to fall	Foliage turns purple in winter, Plant Select®
<i>Duchesnia indica</i> Mock strawberry	4-6	Yellow	Late spring to summer	Aggressive creeper, inedible red fruit
<i>Eriogonum umbellatum</i> Sulfur flower	3-6	Yellow	Early to mid summer	Flower stalk 8 inches, foliage in a low mat, reddish in winter, native
<i>E. umbellatum</i> v. aureum 'Psdowns' Kannah Creek buckwheat	6-12	Yellow	Summer	Foliage turns reddish in winter, Plant Select®
<i>Festuca glauca</i> Blue fescue grass	6-15	Tan	Summer	Bunch grass producing tufts of blue-gray foliage
<i>Juniperus horizontalis</i> Creeping juniper	2-24			Evergreen, several foliage colors
'Bar Harbor'	8-10			Gray-blue foliage, purplish winter color
'Blue Chip'	8-10			Silver-blue foliage, purple in winter
'Icee Blue'	2-4			Compact silver-blue foliage turns purplish in winter
'Hughes'	12-24			Silvery blue foliage turns light purple in winter, distinct radial branching
'Prince of Wales'	4-6			Ground hugging foliage turns plum in winter
'Wiltonii' ('Blue Rug')	4-6			Very low, silver-blue; purplish winter tinge
<i>Juniperus sabina</i> 'Buffalo'	12-18			Bright green foliage on horizontal branches
<i>Marrubium rotundifolium</i> Silverheels horehound	4-6			Silver-fringed rounded foliage, Plant Select®
<i>Nepeta Psfike</i> ^{PP#18,904} Little Trudy® catmint	8-10	Lavender	Spring to fall	Silvery foliage, low compact habit
<i>Penstemon caespitosus</i> Mat penstemon	1-4	Blue	Early summer	Spreading carpet-like growth habit
<i>Penstemon linarioides</i> var. <i>coloradoensis</i> Silverton® bluemat penstemon	8-12	Lavender	Late spring to early summer	Evergreen silver foliage, Plant Select®
<i>Penstemon pinifolius</i> Pineleaf penstemon	6-10	Red-orange	Summer	Needle-like leaves
'Mersea Yellow'	6-8	Yellow	Summer	Needle-like leaves
<i>Phlox subulata</i> Creeping phlox	6	Red, white, lavender	Spring	Moss-like foliage
<i>Persicaria affinis</i> Himalayan border jewel	8-12	Pink	Summer	Aggressive creeper
<i>Potentilla neumanniana</i> Creeping potentilla	2-4	Yellow	Late spring to early summer	Low mat, aggressive
<i>Salvia daghestanica</i> Platinum sage	8-10	Dark blue	Spring to early summer	Silvery white foliage, slow spreading, Plant Select®
<i>Sedum acre</i> Goldmoss sedum	2-4	Yellow	Early summer	Bright green evergreen leaves
<i>Sedum kamtschaticum</i> Kamtschatka stonecrop	4-6	Orange to yellow	Late summer	Toothed, glossy dark green leaves

Table 2. Xeric ground cover plants for part shade to shade

Plant Name	Height (in)	Flower Color	Bloom time	Remarks
<i>Arctostaphylos uva-ursi</i> Kinnikinnick	4-6	Pink	Spring	Evergreen, red berries, native
<i>Euonymus fortunei</i> 'Coloratus' Wintercreeper	12-18	Not important	Not important	Glossy dark green leaves turn purple in winter
<i>Mahonia repens</i> Creeping Oregon grape	6-18	Yellow	Spring	Evergreen holly-like foliage turns reddish in fall, native
<i>Vinca minor</i> Periwinkle	4-6	White or purple	Spring	Semi-evergreen, dark glossy green leaves

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