

Virginia Cooperative Extension

A Partnership of Virginia Tech and Virginia State University



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Ground Covers

Ground covers are low-growing plants that spread quickly to form a dense cover. They add beauty to the landscape and, at the same time, help prevent soil erosion. Grass is the best known ground cover, but grass is not suited to all locations. Other ground cover plants should be used where grass is difficult to grow or maintain. Unlike grass, most ground cover plants cannot be walked on. They can be used effectively to reduce maintenance work and to put the finishing touch on any landscaping project.

Selection of a suitable plant for ground cover depends on the area where it will be grown. Some ground cover plants prefer Partial Shade; others thrive in deep Shade or Full Sun; and a few grow well in either Sun or Shade. The selected ground cover plants listed here grow well in a wide variety of soil types. Some, however, prefer moist soil, while others need dry or well-drained soil. All the ground covers discussed are reliably cold hardy throughout Virginia. Selection for inclusion in this list is based on information or experience that they will grow well in the Prince William area and can be purchased locally or through dependable mail order sources.

When preparing the bed, if you need to add a soil amendment, such as organic matter or fertilizer, add it to the entire planting bed, not just to individual planting holes. Organic materials, such as leaf mold, compost, or well-rotted manure, improve drainage in clay soils and improve water-holding capacity of sandy soils. A soil test provides the best guidance for fertilizer usage. Without this information, a general rule would be to use 3 pounds of a commercial fertilizer, such as 5-10-5, per 100 square feet. Fertilizer can be mixed into the soil at the same time other amendments are incorporated. The soil should be worked to a depth of 6 to 8 inches. Take care to eliminate perennial weeds and grass that might compete with the ground cover during establishment. Most ground cover plants can be planted any time during the growing season, but either spring or fall is preferred.

The arrangement and spacing of plants in the planting bed depends on the growth characteristics of the plant. Space plants so they will develop a uniformly covered area in a relatively short period of time. Plant in staggered rows, not straight lines to get faster coverage. Plants that spread rapidly may be spaced much wider than Slow-spreading types. Spacing also depends on how many plants you can purchase and how quickly a complete cover is wanted. Spacing from 6 inches to 2 feet is most frequently used.

Watering, weeding, mulching, and feeding will be the main requirements of the new ground cover planting. Water 1" per week during dry periods. An occasional thorough soil soaking is better than frequent light watering. Occasional hand weeding with a minimum disturbance of the soil may be necessary. A 1- to 2-inch mulch layer of leaf mold, compost, or similar organic material will conserve soil moisture and reduce weed growth.

It is assumed, unless otherwise noted, that the plants require well-drained soil. Some ground covers were included that will tolerate wet soil for long periods of time. Where “Full Sun” is noted, the plant needs 6 - 8 hours of Sun. The first chart is evergreen plants and the second chart is deciduous ones (those that lose their leaves or die back in winter). The last chart on the page includes those plants that should be avoided due to their invasive nature. If you have questions about the suitability of any plant, please call the Master Gardeners’ Horticulture Help Line at 703 792-7747 or email master_gardener@pwcgov.org

Evergreen Ground Covers

Common name (Botanical Name)	Light req.	Size	Native?	Upkeep	Growth rate	General Info
Baby's Breath <i>Gypsophila repens</i>	Full Sun	4-8"	No	Medium	Fast	White flowers in early summer; deer resistant; prefers slightly alkaline soil; annual but reseeds easily
Barberry <i>(Mahonia repens)</i>	Part to Full Shade	24"	No	Low	Slow	Yellow flowers in spring
Black Mondo Grass <i>Ophiopogon planiscapus</i>	Part to Full Shade	8-12"	No	Low	Medium	Violet/lavender or white flowers; blooming in spring; tolerates some foot traffic.
Candytuft <i>(Iberis sempervirens)</i>	Full to Partial Sun	6-12"	No	Medium	Slow	White flowers in spring
Cotoneaster <i>(Cotoneaster spp.)</i>	Full Sun to Part Shade	12"	No	Low	Fast	Flowers and red berries; requires pruning to keep it pristine
Creeping Juniper <i>(Juniperus horizontalis)</i>	Full Sun	6-24"	Yes	Low	Slow	Variety of colors; be sure to leave space for mature species
Creeping Mazus <i>(Mazus reptans)</i>	Full Sun to Part Shade	12-24"	No	Low	Fast	Profuse purple or white flowers in spring; prefers moist to wet soil; tolerates foot traffic
Creeping Speedwell <i>(Veronica repens)</i>	Full to Partial Sun	1-4"	No	Low	Medium	Blue flowers in spring; deer resistant; attracts butterflies
Creeping St. Johnswort <i>(Hypericum calycinum)</i>	Full to Partial Sun	8-12"	No	Low	Medium	Yellow flowers in summer
Creeping Thyme <i>(Thymus spp.)</i>	Full Sun to Part Shade	3-8"	No	Low	Medium	White to pink flowers in summer, some varieties can be walked on or put between stepping stones.
Golden ragwort (<i>Senecio aureus</i>)	Full Shade	12-18"	Yes	Low	Medium	Thick spreading mats; tall stalks of yellow flowers in spring; cut back flower stalks in summer
Green and Gold <i>(Chrysogonum virginianum)</i>	Full Shade	3-6"	Yes	Low	Medium	Hugs the ground; makes display of yellow flowers in the spring
Green Lavender Cotton <i>(Santolina virens)</i>	Full Sun	12-24"	No	Medium	Fast	yellow flowers in June;

Common name (Botanical Name)	Light Req.	Size	Native?	Upkeep	Growth Rate	General Info
Lambs Ear (<i>Stachys byzantium</i>)	Full Sun	12-18"	No	Low	Fast	Flowers in summer; deer resistant; can get aggressive
Lenten Rose <i>Helleborus spp.</i>)	Part to Full Shade	12-14"	Yes	Medium	Slow	Remove old leaves in spring; yellow green, maroon, or white flowers in late winter or early spring; deer resistant; needs regular watering
Lily turf (<i>Liriope muscari</i>)	Full Sun to Full Shade	12"	No	Low	Fast	Tolerates wet soil; variegated foliage; clumping species great for erosion control; <i>L. spicata</i> can be invasive
Lungwort (<i>Pulmonaria spp.</i>)	Part to Full Shade	8-12"	No	Medium	Slow	Leaves often spotted with silver or white, blooms early spring, leaves persist in winter, red, white, blue or lavender flowers
Moss (many species)	Full Shade	6-24"	Yes	Low	Fast	Water lightly to encourage or to green back up; best encouraged where it already grows or spread pieces or clumps on bare ground; tolerates foot traffic
Pachysandra (<i>Pachysandra procumbens</i>)	Part to Full Shade	9-12"	Yes	Low	Medium	Clipping the tips of shoots in the spring will induce the plant to become denser. The plants should not be cut all the way to the ground. ; <i>P. terminalis</i> can become invasive
Partridge berry (<i>Mitchella repens</i>)	Full Shade	3-6"	Yes	Low	Slow	Hugs the ground; animals love the red berries
Phlox (<i>Phlox spp.</i>)	Full Sun	2-3"	Yes	Medium	Slow	Dense moss like foliage, flowers in spring
Roman Chamomile (<i>Chamaemelum nobile</i>)	Part to Full Shade	6-12"	No	Low	Medium	Blooms mid spring; daisy like flowers, scented; deer resistant; tolerates foot traffic
Sedge (<i>Carex spp.</i>)	Full to Partial Sun	3-18 "	Yes	Low	Medium	Valued for foliage; many tolerate wet areas
Sedges (<i>Carex spp</i>)	Part to Full Shade	12-24"	Yes	Low	Medium	Clumps and colonize easily; taller cultivar
Sedum/Stonecrop (<i>Sedum spp</i>)	Full to Partial Sun	2-24"	Yes	Low	Medium	Thick waxy evergreen leaves (some may die back in winter); sap can be irritating to some people
Spurge (<i>Euphorbia spp.</i>)	Full to Partial Sun	6-24 "	No	Medium	Medium	Sap can be irritating to some people
Thyme (<i>Thymus spp.</i>)	Full to Partial Sun	3-6"	No	Low	Medium	Many different thymes; flowers white, pink to lavender
Wild Ginger (<i>Asarum canadense</i>)	Part to Full Shade	24-36"	Yes	Low	Slow	Flowers in spring under leaves; great for dry areas under trees
Winter green (<i>Gaultheria procumbens</i>)	Part to Full Shade	2-4"	Yes	Low	Medium	Burgundy leaves in fall and winter; small white flowers, fragrant leaves

Deciduous Ground Covers

Common name (Botanical Name)	Light Req.	Size	Native?	Upkeep	Growth Rate	General Info
Astilbe (<i>Astilbe spp</i>)	Part to Full Shade	8-24"	Yes	Low	Medium	Many colors; blooms mid summer
Barrenwort (<i>EpiMedium spp</i>)	Part to Full Shade	6-12"	No	Low	Medium	Leaves persist in winter turning bronze and maroon; dainty flowers are red, lilac, yellow, or white in spring; deer resistant
Bishop's Weed (<i>Aegopodium podagraria</i>)	Full Sun to Part Shade	9-12"	No	Low	Medium	Can be aggressive
Catmint (<i>Nepeta racemosa</i>)	Full Sun	18-36"	No	Low	Fast	Lavender to blue flowers, late spring to early summer; spreading to erect manner
Carolina Jessamine (<i>Gelsemium sempervirens</i>)	Full Sun to Part Shade	3' or Less	Yes	Low	moderate	Can be used as a vine or groundcover; all Parts of plant poisonous, deer resistant; drought tolerant; showy yellow flowers in spring (may bloom again in fall).
Coral Bells (<i>Heuchera spp</i>)	Full to Partial Sun	12-20"	No	Low	Medium	Burgundy or silver highlighted leaves form clumps that flower in late spring to early summer in many colors; leaves persist in winter
Day Lilies (<i>Hemerocallis spp.</i>)	Full Sun to Full Shade	12-24"	No	Low	Medium	3 foot flower stems; many varieties and colors; good on slopes; orange daylily can become invasive--keep away from natural areas
Evening primrose (<i>Oenothera speciosa</i>)	Full Sun to Partial Shade	up to 24"	Yes	Low	Fast	Drought tolerant; pink flowers May-July, spreads rapidly
Ferns (<i>many species</i>)	Part to Full Shade	24-36"	Yes	Low	Slow	Asymmetric clumps; tolerate wet conditions; Try cinnamon fern, painted fern, Hay scented fern and Christmas fern
Foamflower (<i>Tiarella cordifolia</i>)	Part to Full Shade	6-14 "	Yes	Low	Medium	Uniquely shaped leaves often splashed with color; flowers in spring in Shades of pink and white; foliage may persist depending on winter
Groundcover Rose (<i>Rosa spp.</i>)	Full Sun	12-48"	No	High	Medium	Flowers in summer; avoid multiflora roses as they become invasive

Common name (Botanical Name)	Light Req.	Size	Native?	Upkeep	Growth Rate	General Info
Hosta (<i>Hosta spp.</i>)	Part to Full Shade	3-24"	No	Low	Medium	Some tolerate wet soils; many varieties
Ladies Mantle (<i>Alchemilla spp.</i>)	Part Shade	12-18"	No	Medium	Medium	Delicate sprays of yellow green flowers in mid to later spring; tolerates wet soils
Native Honeysuck (<i>Lonicera sempervirens</i>)	Part to Full Shade	24-36"	Yes	low	Fast	Good source of pollen and nectar; birds love the berries; avoid non native vines as they are invasive
Ornamental grasses (many species)	Full Sun	6-24 "	No	low	Medium	Various blade and flower colors; year round interest; some tolerate wet conditions,
Phlox (<i>Phlox spp.</i>)	Full Sun to Part Shade	4-6"	Yes	low	Medium	Varied colors
Plumbago (<i>Ceratostigma plumbaginoides</i>)	Full to Partial Sun	8-12 "	No	Medium	Medium	Flowers summer to late fall; combines well with winter and spring blooming bulbs
Spotted Dead Nettle (<i>Lamium maculatum</i>)	Part to Full Shade	6-12"	Yes	low	Fast	Pink, purple or white flowers in late spring to late winter
St. John's wort (<i>Hypericum calycinum</i>)	Full Sun to Part Shade	12-36"	No	low	Fast	Yellow flowers, dark green leaves; somewhat shrubby
Sweet Woodruff (<i>Gallium odoratum</i>)	Full Shade	6-8 "	No	low	Medium	White flowers in May; tolerates wet soils; keep away from natural areas; can become invasive
Violets (<i>Viola spp.</i>)	Part to Full Shade	6"	Yes	low	Slow	Provide nectar in spring; hosts to several butterfly larvae
Virginia Creeper (<i>Parthenocissus quinquefolia</i>)	Part to Full Shade	6-12"	Yes	low	Fast	Taller and less dense than ivy; deciduous so less harmful to trees; birds love the berries; can be aggressive; often grows along with poison ivy
Wormwood (<i>Artemisia spp.</i>)	Full Sun	12"	Yes	low	Medium	Silver stems and leaves in summer

INVASIVE GROUND COVER PLANTS TO AVOID

Beware of the "vigorous" ground cover. Sometimes, this term is applied to a plant that can be extremely aggressive in its growth habit even to the point of being considered invasive. Invasive plants exhibit rapid growth and maturity, are highly successful at self-propagating, and have the ability to compete and crowd out other plants. All this leads to a high cost for you in removing or containing such a plant

Common Name	Scientific Name	Information
Bugleweed	<i>Ajuga reptans</i>	Grows extremely rapidly and can invade nearby areas quickly; extensive root system prevents erosion but makes removal of this plant almost impossible.
English Ivy	<i>Hedera helix</i>	Spreads rapidly and can damage mortar in bricks when climbing; weight can cause limbs to fall from trees
Periwinkle	<i>Vinca major and Vinca minor</i>	Highly aggressive spreader and will invade lawns
Crown Vetch	<i>Coronilla varia</i>	Excellent preventer of soil erosion but very invasive; will take over areas and be impossible to clear out
Creeping Jenny	<i>Lysimachia nummularia</i>	Potentially invasive
Chameleon plant	<i>Houttuynia cordata</i>	Invasive due to underground spreading rhizomes