

Let's Cover Some Ground (published 2024-07-20)

By Kate O'Lenic, Master Gardener

Groundcover plants could be your new best friends. There are beautiful and helpful plants that can be used in shade or sun. Some of the reasons I love groundcovers include reducing the use of mulch, blocking growth of weeds, making a bare space look fabulous, and helping pollinators. There are so many good reasons to use them.

Groundcovers can fill the role of weed control by out-competing weeds for resources and by shading the ground to reduce or prevent weed seeds from germinating. But you need to choose the right plants to be sure they'll work well.

Let's get into the shady areas of your gardens first. If you have shade to dress up, you have a lot of great choices for groundcover plants. As always, you need to match the plant to the site to make sure it will be happy in its new home. And, as always, native plants are strongly recommended.

A wonderful plant to consider is mountain pachysandra (*Pachysandra procumbens*). It is semi-evergreen, low maintenance, and has no common problems. In USDA zones 7 and 8, it is semi-evergreen. It has a scented flower, too. It is very adaptable to soil types, including clay soil and is native to East Tennessee. You can find details about it at <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/pachysandra-procumbens/>.

Another fantastic plant is the common blue violet (*Viola sororia*). Its beautiful heart-shaped leaf is deer resistant, but rabbits love them. The good news is that violas are hardy buggers and spring back quickly from being trimmed by the bunnies. Another benefit for pollinators is the blue flower present in early spring. Butterflies and bees love the nectar. It spreads quickly which makes it a great groundcover. <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/viola-sororia/>

What about phlox? Blue phlox (*Phlox divaricate*) can really make a big statement in a shaded area. The mass of blue flowers attracts hummingbirds and bees. It can handle clay soil and dry conditions and forms a dense mat that stymies weed growth extremely well. <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/phlox-divaricata/>

Other plants that like shade and can fill the role of groundcover include native ferns (see Resource at the end), coral bells (*Heuchera americana*) and wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*). There are quite a few native ferns to consider and several are evergreen. See "Groundcovers," <https://extension.umd.edu/resource/groundcovers/> for more information, including plants to avoid. There are many groundcovers sold that are invasive, non-native plants. Be sure to check Tennessee Invasive Plant Council's website to be sure you avoid the bad guys. <https://www.tnipc.org/invasive-plants/>

There are also great groundcover choices for sunny areas. Violas grow well in full sun or full shade. Another variety of phlox grows well in sun, creeping phlox (*Phlox subulata*). It can handle hot, dry weather. It looks stunning draped over a wall and the gorgeous flowers attract pollinators. <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/phlox-subulata/>

For something different with great texture, consider Wood's sedge (*Carex woodii*). It is a low-growing sedge that is great at muscling out weeds with its dense mat. It spreads nicely, has finely textured foliage, and straw-colored flowers in April and May. It is one of few sedges that does well in full sun. <https://mtcubacenter.org/trials/carex-for-the-mid-atlantic-region/carex-woodii-woods-sedge/>

Barren strawberry (*Waldsteinia fragarioides*) is an interesting choice for a groundcover. It is evergreen and the leaves are three-lobed. It has a small yellow flower from March to May. It is very low-growing and forms dense coverage with its evergreen leaves. Deer tend to avoid it. <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/waldsteinia-fragarioides/> and <https://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/PlantFinder/PlantFinderDetails.aspx?kempercode=w9>

Groundcovers can fight weeds, act as a "living mulch", and beautify an area that is bare or just covered in mulch. They aid pollinators and can act as a food source for small animals. There are so many good reasons to fill empty spaces in your gardens with groundcovers.

## Resources

"Groundcovers," <https://extension.umd.edu/resource/groundcovers/>

"Wild Ginger" <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/asarum-canadense/>

"Heuchera americana," <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/heuchera-americana/>

"Find-a-Plant - Native Ferns,"

[https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/find\\_a\\_plant/?light\\_id=4&usda\\_zone\\_id=13&plant\\_type\\_id=7&plant\\_type\\_id=11](https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/find_a_plant/?light_id=4&usda_zone_id=13&plant_type_id=7&plant_type_id=11)

## How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at [www.netmga.net](http://www.netmga.net). Click the link at the top of the page, "ASK A MASTER GARDENER" to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

*The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.*