



## William T. Kemper Center for Home Gardening

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### Ground Cover Plants for Missouri Gardens

#### Introduction

Why not consider low-growing ground cover plants as an alternative to turf grass in problem locations. Ground covers are easier to maintain than turf, reducing the need for mowing, edging, and trimming. They may be good for growing under trees in the shade or on steep banks to help prevent soil erosion. Ground covers also help suppress weed establishment, conserve moisture, and regulate soil temperature. They can soften harsh building and parking lot lines and provide contrasting elements of leaf and flower shapes and colors.

#### Plant Selection

Select plants that are well-suited to the light exposure, soil type and drainage. See Table 1 below for suggested plants for various ground cover locations. Consider planting North American native plants as ground covers. They require less maintenance and less fertilizer. The table below also includes information on a plant's suitability for dry shade, its tolerance to slight foot traffic, and its resistance to deer. Take note that if deer are hungry enough no plant is safe from browsing.

When obtaining native plants be sure and purchase nursery propagated plants only. Do not dig from the natural habitat.

#### Bed Preparation

The first step in preparing an area for ground covers should be to collect a soil sample for analysis. Testing and amending soil before plants are installed will give your plants the best start and facilitate easier incorporation of needed soil amendments. [Soil Testing Information](#). Remove undesired plants and weeds by digging or pulling. Renting a sod-stripping machine can be useful when removing sod. The herbicide [glyphosate](#) can be applied one to two weeks before soil preparation to kill weeds root and all. Adjust the soil pH as recommended by the soil test. Incorporate a 2-inch layer of compost, peat moss, or decomposed manure with 1 ½ to 2 pounds of 12-12-12 fertilizer per 100 square feet to a depth of 8 to 10 inches.

#### Planting

Planting in early spring is recommended as this allows plants time to develop roots before summer heat and drought arrives. Space the plants so the site will be completely covered in one or two growing seasons. Spacing will depend upon the plants chosen, the size of the transplants, and the species' growth rate and habit. Determine the number of plants needed for a specific square footage of area by consulting Table 1 in the [University of Missouri Extension Bulletin G6835](#). Coarse netting may be used on steeper slopes to

prevent erosion until plants are established. Mulch the area to a depth of 2 to 3 inches and water the plants well.

### Watering, Fertilizing, and Maintenance

Check soil weekly with a probe or spade to make certain the soil is moist. Apply enough water to penetrate the soil to a depth of 12 inches. Time your sprinkler system to calculate how long you need to irrigate to provide the needed amount of water. Control weeds as they appear.

Established ground covers may not require annual fertilizing. Applying a balanced fertilizer such as 12-12-12 fertilizer at 1 ½ to 2 pounds per 100 square feet in spring or late fall can promote more vigorous growth. Water well to wash the fertilizer off the leaves of the plants and into the soil. Dry fertilizer remaining on the leaves can burn the leaves (cause brown spots on the leaves).

If your ground cover becomes very dense, thinning or pruning the plants to facilitate better air circulation can reduce disease problems. Pruning is best done in spring or fall. Additionally, the appearance of herbaceous ground covers can be improved by removing old dead foliage in early spring. A lawn mower set at its highest setting can work well. This annual spring cleanup can improve the appearance and growth pattern of herbaceous perennial ground covers.

Pests and diseases of the following recommended ground covers are usually minimal. If a problem is noticed, identify the problem before implementing control measures. Avoid using pesticides when plants are in flower as this can be harmful to bees and other beneficial insects.

**Table 1.** Plants suited for ground covers under 1 foot tall

\* = Native to North America

S = Somewhat deer resistant

Common Name	Scientific Name	Full sun	Part shade	Full shade	Dry shade	Foot traffic	Deer resistant
<b>Full Sun</b>							
*Aromatic aster	<a href="#"><i>Aster oblongifolius</i></a>	X			N	N	Y
*Purple poppy mallow	<a href="#"><i>Callirhoe involucrata</i></a>	X			N	N	S
Cheddar pink	<a href="#"><i>Dianthus</i> 'Bath's Pink'</a>	X			N	N	S
Pinks	<a href="#"><i>Dianthus</i> 'Devon Xera' FIRE STAR</a>	X			N	N	S
Cheddar pink	<a href="#"><i>Dianthus</i> 'Fueurhexe' FIREWITCH</a>	X			N	N	S
Cheddar pink	<a href="#"><i>Dianthus gratianopolitanus</i> 'Grandiflorus'</a>	X			N	N	S
Candytuft	<a href="#"><i>Iberis sempervirens</i></a>	X			N	Y	S
*Creeping juniper	<a href="#"><i>Juniperus horizonatalis</i> 'Blue Chip'</a>	X			N	N	S
Creeping phlox	<a href="#"><i>Phlox subulata</i></a>	X			N	Y	S
Sedum	<a href="#"><i>Sedum</i> 'Rosy Glow'</a>	X			N	Y	S
White stonecrop	<a href="#"><i>Sedum album</i> 'Coral Carpet'</a>	X			N	Y	S
Turkish sedum	<a href="#"><i>Sedum bithynicum</i> 'Sea Stars'</a>	X			N	Y	S
*Prairie dropseed	<a href="#"><i>Sporobolus heterolepis</i></a>	X			N	N	N
Caraway thyme	<a href="#"><i>Thymus herba-barona</i></a>	X			N	Y	S
Thyme	<a href="#"><i>Thymus polytrichus</i> subsp. <i>britannicus</i></a>	X			N	Y	S
Thyme	<a href="#"><i>Thymus praecox</i></a>	X			N	Y	S
Wild thyme	<a href="#"><i>Thymus serpyllum</i></a>	X			N	Y	S

**Full Sun to Part  
Shade**

Plumbago	<u><a href="#">Ceratostigma plumbaginoides</a></u>	X	X		N	N	S
Bloody cranesbill	<u><a href="#">Geranium sanguineum</a></u>	X	X		Y	N	Y
*Alum root	<u><a href="#">Heuchera richardsonii</a></u>	X	X		Y	N	S
*Dwarf crested iris	<u><a href="#">Iris cristata</a></u>	X	X		N	N	N
Mazus	<u><a href="#">Mazus reptans</a></u>	X	X		N	Y	S
Lesser mexican stonecrop	<u><a href="#">Sedum confusum</a></u>	X	X		Y	Y	S
Orange stonecrop	<u><a href="#">Sedum kamtschaticum var. ellacombeanum</a></u>	X	X		Y	N	S

**Full Sun to Full  
Shade**

Lily turf	<u><a href="#">Liriope muscari</a></u>	X	X	X	Y	Y	S
Lily turf	<u><a href="#">Liriope spicata</a></u>	X	X	X	Y	Y	S

**Part Shade to Full  
Shade**

*Wild ginger	<u><a href="#">Asarum canadense</a></u>		X	X	Y	N	S
European ginger	<u><a href="#">Asarum europaeum</a></u>		X	X	Y	N	S
*American beakgrain	<u><a href="#">Diarrhena americana</a></u>		X	X	N	N	S
Bishop's hat	<u><a href="#">Epimedium grandiflorum 'Lilafee'</a></u>		X	X	Y	N	S
Bishop's hat	<u><a href="#">Epimedium x rubrum</a></u>		X	X	Y	N	S
Bishop's hat	<u><a href="#">Epimedium x versicolor 'Sulphureum'</a></u>		X	X	Y	N	S
Bishop's hat	<u><a href="#">Epimedium x versicolor 'Versicolor'</a></u>		X	X	Y	N	S
Bishop's hat	<u><a href="#">Epimedium x warleyense</a></u>		X	X	Y	N	S
Bishop's hat	<u><a href="#">Epimedium x youngianum</a></u>		X	X	Y	N	S
Bishop's hat	<u><a href="#">Epimedium x youngianum 'Niveum'</a></u>		X	X	Y	N	S
*Wild geranium	<u><a href="#">Geranium maculatum</a></u>		X	X	Y	N	S
Hosta	<u><a href="#">Hosta 'Emerald Tiara'</a></u>		X	X	S	N	N
Hosta	<u><a href="#">Hosta 'Ground Sulphur'</a></u>		X	X	S	N	N
Hosta	<u><a href="#">Hosta 'Sparkling Burgundy'</a></u>		X	X	S	N	N
Hosta	<u><a href="#">Hosta 'Vanilla Cream'</a></u>		X	X	S	N	N
Yellow archangel	<u><a href="#">Lamium galeobdolon</a></u>		X	X	Y	Y	S
Mondo grass	<u><a href="#">Ophiopogon japonicus</a></u>		X	X	Y	Y	Y
Japanese pachysandra	<u><a href="#">Pachysandra terminalis</a></u>		X	X	Y	Y	S
*Christmas fern	<u><a href="#">Polystichum acrostichoides</a></u>		X	X	Y	N	S
Lungwort	<u><a href="#">Pulmonaria saccharata 'Mrs. Moon'</a></u>		X	X	Y	N	S
*Three-leaved stonecrop	<u><a href="#">Sedum ternatum</a></u>		X	X	Y	S	S