

Groundcovers are an alternative to grass



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Education Resource**

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Often homeowners have difficulty growing grass in certain areas of their yards. The conditions may not be appropriate for turfgrass in these places. Consider using groundcovers, which are low-growing plants that grow rapidly to form dense plantings. They are attractive and many thrive in places where turfgrasses have difficulty growing. By providing masses of attractive foliage, groundcovers help unify the landscape. The plants are tough, durable, and most are rapid growers. The choice of a suitable groundcover depends on the conditions in the area it will be planted.

When planting groundcovers, till organic matter into the upper 6 to 8 inches of the soil. Apply a 1- to 2-inch layer of organic mulch, such as pine straw or pine bark, after planting. Proper spacing is important to prevent the plants from crowding other plants and each other. Most groundcovers should be planted about 1 to 2 feet apart.

There are many different groundcovers that can be used in a variety of site conditions. In areas that are hot and exposed to full sun, several types of horizontal-growing junipers, such as shore juniper, Parsons, and blue rug junipers, thrive as long as the soil has adequate drainage. Another excellent choice for full sun is creeping phlox, often known as thrift. It has brilliant pink and white flowers in the early spring.

Liriope, mondo grass, pachysandra, and confederate jasmines thrive in the shade. They will cover the ground in places where grass and other plants will not. Groundcovers have practical functions as well. They are sometimes used to control erosion on slopes and banks. Also, thick masses of growth help reduce weed populations in landscape plantings.

Some groundcovers should not be planted due to their invasive nature. Vinca, or periwinkle, is a commonly used groundcover that has an invasive growth habit. It has small leaves and purple flowers. The plant rapidly spreads and can form mounds up to 2 feet high. If you plant either one of these, continual pruning will be necessary in order to keep them under control.

If properly selected, planted, and maintained, groundcovers can be attractive and functional additions to the landscape. Their presence will enhance the beauty and value of the landscape.



*Japanese pachysandra thrives in shady areas where turfgrasses have difficulty growing.
(Photograph by Timothy Daly)*