

Groundcovers for the Shade

It always amazes me how some folks are determined to grow lawn grass in the shade. They plant grass seed, water it regularly, tend to the few sprigs that grow, and get frustrated when it fails. So they plant more seed, water it regularly, tend to the few sprigs that grow, and get frustrated when it fails. Instead, they could choose from a large palette of groundcovers that not only prefer growing in shady conditions, they look beautiful doing it.

One of the three most common choices is Baltic ivy (*Hedera helix* 'Thorndale'). It vigorously spreads by 12 to 24-inch creeping stems that set roots from anywhere along the stem. Baltic ivy emerges kelly green but quickly turns dark green. It forms an evergreen mat just 6 to 8 inches tall. It will even climb up tree trunks standing in its path. Baltic ivy grows well in sun or shade and is adaptable to most soils.

Another widely used choice is periwinkle, also called creeping myrtle (*Vinca minor* 'Dart's Blue'). It spreads rapidly to form a low, evergreen groundcover. Trailing stems reach 18 inches and set roots at the nodes as they creep along the ground. I think the best reason to choose this groundcover is its bluish flowers that bloom heavily in spring and sporadically throughout the summer. It grows best in moist, well-drained soils but can handle drought once established.

The last of the 'big three' is purple wintercreeper (*Euonymus fortunei* 'Coloratus'). Choose this one if you want something with a little more size. It grows 12 inches tall and spreads quickly with stems that root as they go and, like ivy, will climb objects they encounter. In fall and winter, the normally dark green evergreen foliage turns purplish-red. It grows in sun or shade and just about any type of soil, except wet ones.

One of my favorite groundcovers for shade is sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*). Its fine-textured foliage emerges bright green in spring before turning dark green and forms a dense, weed-choking mat that smells like freshly mown hay when crushed. Very sweet, snowy white flowers bloom in May and June. It grows best in moist soils in part to full shade, but tolerates periods of drought in my garden.



Another groundcover I wouldn't be without is spotted deadnettle (*Lamium maculatum*). It sprawls up to 24 inches. Silver-green variegated foliage brightens up a shady spot, and flowers appear in May and June. Anne Greenaway has mauve pink flowers; Beacon Silver has dark pink blooms; lavender flowers bloom on Orchid Frost; Pink Pewter has clear pink flowers; and White Nancy blooms in white. Spotted deadnettle grows best in moist, well-drained soil in light shade. In prolonged periods of summer drought, it may die back but is usually rejuvenated by the cooler temperatures of fall.

Yellow archangel (*Lamiastrum galeobdolon*) also has silver-green variegated foliage but produces yellow flowers in June. Variegatum is taller – up to 18 inches tall, has larger leaves and vigorously spreads through the garden. Herman's Pride is shorter – just 12 inches tall, has a neater look, and more politely expands.

If you are having a particularly difficult time giving up the idea of lawn grass, consider planting creeping lily-turf (*Liriope spicata*). It looks like grass on steroids. It grows 8 to 12 inches tall and each clump spreads by rhizomes 6 to 12 inches wide. In August to mid September, purple flower spikes bloom just above the foliage followed by dark blue berries. Creeping lilyturf prefers part to full shade and can adapt to most soils.

Another popular selection is carpet bugle (*Ajua reptans*). Beautiful blue flowers on 4 to 6 inch spikes shine in May and June. It forms a dense, low, mat-like groundcover that grows in sun to shade. The more sun it receives the more moisture it requires, and supplemental watering is required during extended periods without rain. Bronze Beauty has metallic bronze-tinted green foliage, and Burgundy Glow sports pink, white and green variegated foliage. Catlin's Giant is a larger variety that reaches 6 to 8 inches tall with bronze-green foliage, and Chocolate Chip is a smaller selection that barely reaches 2 inches tall and features dark, chocolate-colored leaves.

There are two varieties of ginger (*Asarum*) that enjoy shady conditions. Canadian ginger has large, heart-shaped leaves and grows 6 to 12 inches tall and quickly spread. European ginger has smaller, glossy evergreen foliage on plants that reach up to 6 inches tall and spread slowly. Both prefer a site with moist, but well-drained, highly organic soil. European ginger has performed admirably for me in dry shade. I just wish it would spread faster.

Barrenwort (*Epimedium*) is another groundcover that, once established, gets high praise. Persian Epimedium (*E. versicolor* 'Sulphureum') has grown extremely well for me – its heart-shaped, semi-evergreen foliage has covered a 6 by 3 foot area in 5 or 6 years. Its yellow star-like flowers are pretty in April and May. Persian Epimedium is the best barrenwort for dry shade.

Golden ragwort (*Senecio aureus*) is attractive in a shady spot in my garden in area that is very wet in the spring and after heavy rains. Very shiny, round, toothed leaves form robust mounds 12 inches tall. Yellow daisy-like flowers bloom in mid to late spring followed by fruits with small tufts of 'hair'. Golden ragwort prefers to grow in part to full shade, but will tolerate a lot of sun if given enough moisture.

Whichever groundcover you choose, it's a good idea to mulch when planting to prevent weeds while the groundcover is getting established and to prevent frost heaving during the its first winter. Do yourself a favor and give up on lawn grass in shady areas. Groundcovers are prettier and will save you time, money and aggravation.

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