Ground Covers – The Good, The Not-So-Bad and The Bad

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Ground covers are advertised as a way to discourage weeds from taking over garden beds, leaving time to enjoy the benefits of careful planting. Many ground covers provide a mass of color from the flowers they produce or the color of their foliage. Ground covers can hide problem areas in a lawn or fill steep slopes that make mowing hazardous. They can reduce the amount of lawn that needs mowing and they can provide food for pollinators.

However, the prepared gardener should research a groundcover before adding it to a landscape. It is important to match the type and amount of sun, the moisture and nutrient conditions of the soil and the growing zone of the final bedding area to satisfy the needs of both the gardener and the plant. Finally, it is also important to consider the growing habits of the ground cover. Some are slow growing and easy to control, some are more assertive and grow steadily but need a watchful eye to avoid crowding into nearby plants. There are also some ground covers that are so aggressive that they border on invasive and shouldn't be put in a residential garden.

Some of the 'Good' types of ground covers are those that grow more slowly and manage to stay in a limited space or need little attention for control. Examples include two shade tolerant types of phlox, the creeping phlox (*Phlox stolinifera*), and the woodland phlox (*Phlox divaricata*). Phlox is native to North America. Most varieties thrive in humus-y, well-drained soil with medium moisture.

Another 'Good' slow grower is candytuft (*Iberis sempervirens*). This spreading ground cover prefers a well-drained sunny spot with medium moisture but is tolerant of drought. It suffers from crown rot if placed in poorly drained soil. New plants may form if stems touch the ground, providing new plants that can be transplanted to other areas.

Leading the list of the 'Not-So-Bad' ground covers is pachysandra (*Pachysandra terminalis)*, a plant used in many shady gardens. It grows in partial and full shade as well as partial sun. Full sun causes poor growth. It needs a moist, well drained soil and does not tolerate drought. It grows by rhizomes that form stems that spread underground, producing roots that send up new

plants. In ideal growing conditions it can be aggressive but can be controlled by hand pulling the roaming underground stems.

Other shade-loving 'Not-So-Bad' plants that are moderate growers include dead nettle (*Lamium maculatum*), wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*), and Chinese astilbe (*Astilbe chinensis var. pumila*). Each of these plants prefers average, well-drained, moderately moist soils. Moderately assertive ground covers that prefer sunny spots include creeping thyme (*Thymus serphyllum*), ajuga/bugleweed (*Ajuga reptens*), and several varieties of stonecrop (*Sedum rupestra*).

Ground covers that rate 'The Bad' category include those that are so aggressive that they can cause hours of work to eliminate them from garden areas. The first is the traveling plant goutweed or bishop's weed (*Aegopodium podagraria*). This plant is listed as invasive by the Connecticut Invasive Plant Working Group (CIPWG). Goutweed is said to need a mechanical barrier surrounding it to prevent its unwanted wandering beyond its intended space. An equally aggressive plant is gooseneck loosestrife *(Lysimachia clethroides).* In his book "Garden Perennials" Allan Armitage notes that this plant is the king of roamers and the right place for this plant "happens to be an island bed surrounded by concrete." Both plants grow well in average, well-drained soil with medium moisture in full sun or part shade.

For information on groundcovers or queries on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.

Astilbe

Sedum