



go Native *with* Groundcovers

Looking to cover some ground? Consider these remarkable natives.

BY RITA PELCZAR

GROUNDCOVERS CAN be genuine problem solvers: minimizing erosion, choking out weeds, easing transitions between different areas of the landscape, and offering a low maintenance and more pollinator friendly alternative to turf. But not all groundcovers are equal; in some cases, plants touted as “carefree, fast-growing groundcovers” may accomplish these

objectives, but at a steep price over the long run.

For example, two commonly sold non-native groundcover plants—English ivy (*Hedera helix*) and common periwinkle (*Vinca minor*)—spread aggressively, often escaping into natural areas where they form dense mats that displace native plants. Once established, they are difficult to eradicate. The U.S. Forest Service lists

both as invasive species, and some English ivy cultivars are on the noxious weed list in Washington. A number of other plants sold as groundcovers have high nuisance potential and some are on state noxious weed lists. (For a listing of the most invasive groundcovers by region, see the box on page 17.) The good news is that there are some excellent native alternatives to these aggressive species.

Opposite page: Mayapple spreads to form large colonies on moist, shady sites, but in dry soil it may go dormant and drop its leaves in late summer. **Above:** Adaptable to part sun or full shade, goldenstar forms low-growing mats highlighted with starry yellow flowers from late spring into summer.

There are many wide-spreading and low-growing plants with eye-catching textures and contrasting forms that are native to various regions of North America. Those that are native to your region not only solve landscaping problems, they help support pollinators and provide food and cover for wildlife. Some are deciduous, others evergreen; many bear seasonal flowers or fruit. The following are some of the best selections recommended by experts across the country. (For more options, see the web special linked to this issue at www.absgardening.org/tag.)

EASTERN UNITED STATES AND CANADA

The native range of many useful groundcovers spans the eastern half of North America.

first choices,” says William Cullina, president and CEO of Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens in Boothbay. “It can handle light foot traffic but should only be mowed once a year as it goes dormant in autumn.”

Bristleleaf sedge (*Carex eburnea*, Zones 2–8, 8–1) is another good alternative to traditional lawns. It grows six to 12 inches high and spreads slowly by rhizomes. While it prefers an evenly moist soil, it becomes drought tolerant once established. It “looks like a miniature lawn grass... anything from shade to a few hours of sun is perfect,” says Tony Avent, owner of Plant Delights Nursery in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Avent recommends the southeastern native Allegheny spurge (*Pachysandra pro-*

Another choice for shade is partridgeberry (*Mitchella repens*, Zones 4–9, 9–1), whose native range spans from Nova Scotia and Minnesota south to Texas and Florida. “Hard to imagine a better groundcover,” says Avent, “evergreen, white flowers, red fruit, and only a few inches tall.” Its trailing stems root at the nodes to create dense mats. The cultivar ‘Danny’ is a particularly vigorous selection.

Mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum*, Zones 3–9, 8–2) inhabits woodlands from Ontario and Quebec to Texas and Florida. “It grows well in light to full shade, even in full sun, and thrives in practically any well-drained soil, even dry sand,” says Neil Diboll, president of Prairie Nursery in West-



Drought-tolerant Pennsylvania sedge, shown here with clumps of bluestars (*Amsonia* sp.) at the New York Botanical Garden, is ideal for shaded sites.

Among these are grasslike plants such as sedges. Pennsylvania sedge (*Carex pennsylvanica*, USDA Hardiness Zones 3–8, AHS Heat Zones 8–1), for example, is indigenous to dry woodlands of eastern and central North America. Its soft, arching leaves grow about six inches tall and have a wispy appearance. Spreading by rhizomes, it thrives in shade and tolerates drought. “In places where I require a tough, low-maintenance lawn alternative, Pennsylvania sedge is one of my

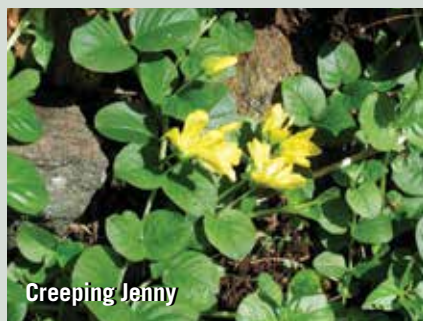
cumbens, Zones 5–9, 9–3) as a groundcover for the woodland garden. It is not aggressive like the more commonly sold Japanese pachysandra (*P. terminalis*), and combines well with other woodland plants. Its patterned, semi-evergreen foliage grows six inches tall, and clumps may spread to create a three- to four-foot patch. White bottlebrush flowers appear from the center of each clump before the new leaves emerge. “The midwinter flowers are insanely fragrant,” says Avent.

field, Wisconsin. Mayapple produces one or two broad, umbrellalike leaves that stand 12 to 18 inches tall, shading a single nodding white flower in early spring, followed by a fleshy green fruit. It spreads slowly to form a sizeable colony over time.

Heather McCargo, executive director of the Wild Seed Project in Portland, Maine, suggests that mayapple is a good choice for large sites, combined with similarly robust shade lovers such as Canada

BEWARE OF INVASIVES

In addition to English ivy and periwinkle, a number of other non-native plants sold as groundcovers can be invasive in the garden and beyond. Here are a few of the most aggressive by region, alphabetized by botanical name. —R.P.



Creeping Jenny



Crown vetch



Ice plant

EAST AND MIDWEST

Goutweed (*Aegopodium podagraria*)
 Creeping bugleweed (*Ajuga reptans*)
 Creeping Charlie (*Glechoma hederacea*)
 Yellow archangel (*Lamium galeobdolon*)
 Creeping Jenny (*Lysimachia nummularia*)
 Crown vetch (*Securigera varia*, syn. *Coronilla varia*)

MOUNTAIN WEST

Goutweed (*Aegopodium podagraria*)
 Cypress spurge (*Euphorbia cyparissius*)
 Creeping Charlie (*Glechoma hederacea*)

CALIFORNIA

Ice plant (*Carpobrotus edulis*)
 German or Cape ivy (*Delairea odorata*)
 Mexican feather grass (*Stipa tenuissima*)

PACIFIC NORTHWEST

Italian arum (*Arum italicum*)
 Yellow archangel (*Lamium galeobdolon*)
 Spotted dead nettle (*Lamium maculatum*)
 Creeping Jenny (*Lysimachia nummularia*)
 Lesser celandine (*Ranunculus ficaria*)

windflower (*Anemone canadensis*, Zones 3–7, 7–1) and hay-scented fern (*Dennstaedtia punctilobula*, Zones 3–8, 8–1). “Ideally, a groundcover should include several species combined to create a beautiful tapestry of foliage and blooms, offering a long season of interest to humans and pollinators,” says McCargo.

For sunny sites, McCargo, Diboll, and Cullina all recommend bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*, Zones 2–6, 6–1) whose native range extends across northern North America and much of the western United States. “Bearberry is a remarkably tough evergreen in the heath family that survives in hot, dry, windy, and cold situations as long as it is planted in well-drained, acidic soil. Early flowers are a favorite of native bees and cranberry red fruits attract birds in the fall,” says Cullina. It grows only four inches tall but spreads to create broad, dense mats.

Native from Pennsylvania and Ohio to Florida, goldenstar (*Chrysogonum virginianum*, Zones 5–9, 9–2) forms a bright green, six- to 12-inch-tall mat of foliage, which may be evergreen in mild winters. It thrives in



A slow spreader, bearberry is worth growing because of its evergreen foliage, early spring flowers, and cranberrylike fruits in fall.

shade but adapts to sun as long as there is sufficient water. In spring, bright yellow, daisy-like flowers cover the plants and continue to appear sporadically through summer. It’s an excellent choice for banks to prevent erosion.

WESTERN CHOICES

In the arid Southwest, groundcovers rarely spread aggressively like ivy or periwinkle does in wetter climates. “Native groundcovers tend to make pools of cover where water is more available and can be quite sparse in dry gardens,” says Judith Phillips, a landscape designer and author in Albuquerque, New Mexico. “Dryness limits the potential for plants to become invasive unless watered excessively,” she adds.

Desert zinnia (*Zinnia grandiflora*, Zones 5–9, 9–3), which forms a mat six to eight inches tall, is among Phillips’s favorite native groundcovers. This perennial “slowly spreads by rhizomes to form dense colonies of pale green, grassy leaves topped with papery yellow flowers from May through September,” says Phillips. “It is low-growing enough to use in wide gaps between flagstones to reduce the reflected heat from the



paving.” Native from Kansas to the foothills of the Rockies and south into Mexico, it is adaptable to most soils “with watering every two weeks while blooming, monthly the rest of the year,” adds Phillips.

Yerba mansa (*Anemopsis californica*, Zones 4–10, 10–4) can be found growing beneath cottonwood trees along southwestern rivers. This low-spreading perennial with large leathery leaves bears white flowers on 12-inch stems in late spring and summer. “It makes a dense, weed-resistant groundcover once well established in shaded rainwater gardens,” says Phillips. “Yerba mansa’s aromatic foliage turns rust color after frost and is an interesting contrast for blonde native grasses clustered in the sun nearby. It needs shade and deep watering twice a month April through October to spread, and prefers heavier clay soils that hold moisture well.”

Panayoti Kelaidis, senior curator at the Denver Botanic Gardens, recommends creeping mahonia (*Mahonia repens*, Zones 5–8, 8–3) as an extremely tough groundcover for sun or shade. It produces “fragrant flowers in early spring and

Left: In moist, shady sites, yerba mansa forms a dense groundcover. White flowers bloom from late spring into summer, and the foliage gives off a pleasant aroma. **Bottom:** Creeping mahonia offers four-season interest through fragrant yellow spring flowers, bluish-black summer fruits, and tinted fall and winter foliage.



showy fruit in fall, with matte green leaves taking on orange and red tints through winter,” says Kelaidis. It grows to 12 inches tall, and spreads to three feet.

Hummingbird trumpet (*Zauschneria garrettii*, Zones 5–10, 10–5) grows about six inches tall and spreads to several feet across. “Its brilliant red flowers in summer attract hummingbirds,” says Kelaidis. He notes that it thrives in any sunny, well-drained spot, and is “hardy to 10,000 feet in the Rockies.”

For sunny dry sites, Bruce Reed, horticulturist at Santa Barbara Botanic Garden in California, suggests ‘Pigeon Point’, a selection of western native coyote brush (*Baccharis pilularis*, Zones 7–10, 12–1), that grows one to two feet tall. “A single plant can spread six to eight feet across, making it a great choice for covering large areas,” says Reed. It bears small, evergreen leaves and is “able to withstand even hot,

Sources

Far Reaches Farm, Port Townsend, WA. www.farreachesfarm.com.

High Country Gardens, Shelburne, VT. www.highcountrygardens.com.

Las Pilitas Nursery, Santa Margarita, CA. www.laspilitas.com.

Plant Delights Nursery, Raleigh, NC. www.plantdelights.com.

Prairie Moon Nursery, Winona, MN. www.prairiemoon.com.

Prairie Nursery, Westfield, WI. www.prairienursery.com.

Resources

Covering Ground by Barbara W. Ellis. Storey Publishing, North Adams, MA, 2007.

Native Alternatives to Invasive Plants by C. Colston Burrell. Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Brooklyn, NY, 2011.

Native Plant Finder (online tool), National Wildlife Federation, www.nwf.org/NativePlantFinder.

dry, south-facing slopes and stay beautifully green,” he adds.

Artemisia californica ‘Canyon Gray’ (Zones 7–10, 10–7) is a dwarf form of California sagebrush introduced by the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden. “Found on a rocky islet off California’s Channel Islands, this has proved an easy and dependable choice in Southern California, providing year-round silvery, needlelike foliage,” says Reed. It grows in broad mounds, five to six feet across, and no more than two feet tall—much shorter in hot, dry situations.

For the cooler, wetter Pacific Northwest, Joseph Abken, executive director of the Kruckeberg Botanic Garden Foundation in Shoreline, Washington, recommends starry false Solomon’s seal (*Maianthemum stellatum*, syn. *Smilacina stellata*, Zones 3–7, 7–1) for planting beneath deciduous trees. This rhizomatous perennial, which is indigenous to much of North America, thrives in moist, shady woodlands or near ponds or streams, and grows one to two feet tall. In May and June, each arching stem bears a two- to three-inch-long raceme of white, star-shaped flowers, followed by small, purple-striped, green fruit. The mature red



Top: Hummingbird trumpet is suited for sunny sites, bearing tubular red summer flowers that attract hummingbirds. **Above:** For shady sites, try American barrenwort, which forms colonies of heart-shaped, green leaves surmounted by dainty wands of starry, white flowers starting in spring.

fruit is favored by a variety of wildlife. “Established patches of *Maianthemum stellatum* are elegant and serene, setting off with great effect,” says Abken.

American barrenwort (*Vancouveria hexandra*, Zones 5–8, 8–5) is another perennial ideal for part to full shade. Native to areas west of the Cascade Mountains, it grows 12 to 18 inches tall with compound basal leaves bearing small, heart-shaped leaflets. Open panicles of dainty, nodding, white flowers with backward-flaring pet-

als appear from late spring to summer. It is “an airy, delicate-looking plant that is tough as nails,” says Abken.

No matter where you garden, there are native plants ready to cover your ground. Select ones suited to your site conditions and nurture them until they are established. After that, they will reward you—and a variety of wildlife—with their manifold charms. 🌿

A contributing editor for The American Gardener, Rita Pelczar lives in the mountains of North Carolina.